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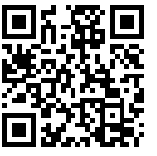

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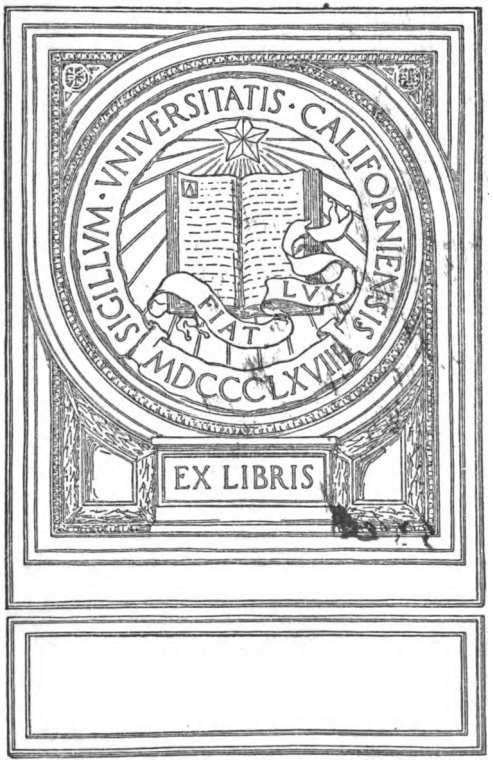

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R.A.F. IN RUSSIA

By

HUBERT GRIFFITH

DEDICATED TO
WING-COMMANDER H. N. G. ISHERWOOD,
D.F.C., A.F.C., Order of Lenin,
and
MAJOR-GENERAL KUZNETSOV,
Red Air Force;
to the Fighter-Boys of No. 151 Wing, R.A.F.
and to their Soviet opposite numbers.

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LONDON:
HAMMOND, HAMMOND AND COMPANY, LTD.
36, Great Russell Street, W.C.1

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FOREWORD

TO

"R.A.F. IN RUSSIA"

BY WING-COMMANDER H. N. G. ISHERWOOD, D.F.C., A.F.C., ORDER OF LENIN.

ALTHOUGH I am unaware of the exact contents of Flight-Lieutenant Griffith's book, I can say that should it be as interesting and entertaining as the diary which he kept out in Russia, it will make good reading.

If in his book he had praised the spirit of our own fighter-boys and of the Russian pilots, and indicated that the friendliness and co-operation that we received all the time out there was extremely warm and successful —he is stating only the bare truth.

The attention to detail and the trouble that the Russians took on our behalf were astonishing, and form a model of how aid can be given to such an expedition.

This fine spirit of co-operation—and the adaptability of the R.A.F. wherever they go—did much to make a success of the whole episode.

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R.A.F. IN RUSSIA

Chapter I

Design of an Expedition

December morning. A grey day over Murmansk Sound, in the northernmost point of North Russia. The landscape is an endless blend of grey against grey—the waters of the Sound grey almost to black, the grey shape of a British cruiser lying out in midstream, the low desolate hillsides that lock the Sound a lighter grey (in a thaw lately the dazzling whiteness of the snow of a few days ago has turned to grey slush with the grey under-rock showing through it), and the sky above is thick with hurrying grey clouds heavy with more snow. About as desolate a scene as could be found anywhere inside the Arctic Circle.

Troops are going aboard the cruiser, the last detachment of "No. 151 Wing, R.A.F." the main body of which is being withdrawn and embarking, as its work has come to an end. A couple of English Hurricanes are cutting about through the driving clouds, visible one minute as dark grey silhouettes, lost the next.

There need have been nothing remarkable about this. For months past the sky over Murmansk has been streaked with British Hurricanes, flown at first by British fighter pilots, then, in increasing numbers, by Russian fighter pilots. It might easily be any patrol of the countless patrols carried out from Vianga aerodrome lately. But it is a specialized operational patrol, designed to give cover in case German aircraft, operating from behind a line only about fifteen miles away, think of coming over to speed the parting guests with a few bombs, or ranging the German gunners on them. In view of the conditions —the dense clouds that hang the sky—any such German

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raid is an extreme unlikelihood, almost an impossibility. But the patrol has been arranged, and the arrangement is kept to. Partly for the sake of safety (because it is as well to take nothing for granted), partly out of courtesy, partly as a farewell flicker of fun—the patrol is being flown by Major-General Kuznetzov, of the Russian Fleet Air-Arm, the first Russian to fly a British Hurricane three months ago and the commander of that sector of the front since the day the British Wing arrived, and by Captain Safonov,* Russian air-ace, and "Hero of the Soviet Union," the possessor of a distinction equivalent to our own V.C.

It was the end of the British Wing's mission. And it was a convincing and off-the-record tribute to the mission's success—a Major-General, and a pilot of the equivalent celebrity of our own Mallan or Nicholson, think that it would be a nice idea personally to fly the last patrol above our heads, as the Soviet equivalent of "God speed" to the journey. It was a symbol and a gesture. Wars are not won by "symbols" and "gestures," but as between Allies on the battle-field they can help it along encouragingly.

* * * * *

A short, informed, but not-too-official record of the doings of No. 151 Wing, R.A.F. in North Russia may be of some interest to the general public. In the first place it must be stated that the Expedition was a small one, with a definite and limited task to perform—it was an "interlude," and "episode," rather than an even minor campaign. It was a "short story," with a beginning, a middle, and a planned end; rather than having anything in it of the broad epic sweep of the "Battle of Britain" or the epic told in "Bomber Command." From its very nature—its transience, the limited number of officers and airmen that took part in it—it formed

* Now Colonel Safonov.

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a more or less family-party, a small number of men sent out to do a particular job in company with their Russian opposite numbers; and in consequence individual character and individual personality stood out and became important—formed, in fact, the very texture of the Expedition—as they could never have done if events included the year-long movements of army-corps and armies. The episode of the first Russian officer flying the first Hurricane was in its way as important a "peak" to the Expedition as any actual engagement in which the Wing took part.

* * * * *

To summarize the intended and the achieved activities of the Wing, then :—the Wing was formed in England in the last days of July, 1941, to go out to Russia for two purposes. First—and the most important—was to teach our new Allies how to fly, erect, and maintain Hurricane aircraft. England was in process of sending out some hundreds of Hurricanes as one of our early instalments of aid, and it was obvious that these would have been useless as a contribution unless they could be taken over on arrival by a very large body of trained Russian personnel—trained not only to fly them (a matter of only a few days instruction to crack pilots), but trained, as ground-staffs, to un-crate them, assemble them, take them to pieces again as the necessity arose, and in general, to "service" and overhaul them and all their wireless and technical equipment, with expert and practised skill. All aircraft and all aero-engines that take the sky obey the same general principles—but it was this specialized knowledge of a particular and complicated type that it was the Wing's first business to provide.

Luckily, it was a job that was able to go forward quite ceaselessly and without intermission from the day that the Wing landed. The Wing Engineer-Officer and the Wing Wireless-Officer (and their interpreters and inter-

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pretresses) were among the hardest-worked members of the Wing. The Russians had got together a collection of extremely able technicians to undergo this instruction (knowing that these in their turn would have to pass on their knowledge to countless other *cadres* of other units), and once they got started there was no stopping them. They worked, in the words of our own Commanding Officer, "LIKE HELL." One of them surprised his tutor by getting 98 per cent. in a written exam.-paper—and that on an engine that he had only known for a few weeks, and through the always difficult medium of interpreted instruction.

The second, more spectacular though less basic, part of the job of the Wing was to try, as far as adverse conditions allowed, to give an exhibition of the destructive qualities of the twelve-gun Hurricane in action—in other words, to shoot down Huns.

Conditions, as had probably been foreseen by the higher authorities, made this more than difficult. To begin with, the base selected was an aerodrome slightly north of Murmansk, and Murmansk itself is roughly 170 miles north of the line of the Arctic Circle. (The choice was obviously dictated by such needs as being near to the port of disembarkation, getting the Wing into action quickly, as it was already so late in the year, and others of a like nature. If the interested reader asks why the Wing was not pushed straight down to Central or Southern Russia, where the weather and climate might have been better, a word or so on Russian transport, distances, and rail-communication later in the narrative will enlighten him. It took one section of the Wing personnel three days and nights to get by train from Archangel to Murmansk, a distance of only three hundred miles as the crow flies : and certain Wing stores took fourteen days to do the same distance. . . .)

Being so far north, meant that snow came down early in the year, and snow-blizzards and continuous days of

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non-flying weather became a frequency. Being so far north meant that the temperature during the stay fell to as low as 27 degrees (Fahrenheit) below freezing ; and, again for the same reason, before the end of the stay the days had shortened to no more than two or three hours of daylight. In all the circumstances, it might have been better flying-weather, and it might even have been worse. In the event, there were about five or six days on which full contact with the enemy was possible by offensive-patrols.

In those five or six days, fifteen German aircraft were shot down by our Hurricane pilots for certain, many others either certainly damaged or probably destroyed, for the loss of only one of our own.

If these figures—of fifteen-to-one in certain victories, leaving out the " probables " altogether—seem to a lay reader to be calculated on a scale that is either flattering or almost fantastic, he can be told exactly how they *were* calculated from a single instance :

Late one afternoon, " B " Flight, 81 Squadron, had come down from a patrol, claiming three victories. Two of these were unexceptionable. There was no possible doubt about them. They had been seen by independent witnesses to crash into the ground, and the wreckages had been identified on the ground. About the third there was a dispute. The young Scottish pilot who had engaged the third aircraft swore that he had got to close quarters, had squirted his twelve guns into it in a long, close-range burst of fire, and had only desisted when he had seen the enemy machine go down in an out-of-control spin in a cloud near the ground. His story was confirmed, in detail, by his flight-commander, a pilot of long experience. But it was the Squadron Leader, a pilot of even greater experience, who had to give the decision on what claim to put in to Intelligence and his comment on hearing the story was : " Yes . . . but they can take an awful lot of lead and still get away with it ; we'll only have to claim him a ' probable.' "

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The encounter then, was entered in the records as a "probable," and the matter would have finished there. It was only the next morning, when the wreckage of the third enemy machine had been definitely identified on the ground, that the claim was allowed to go forward as a certain victory.

And as regards the "probables," seeing that the country was wide and wild and almost incredibly uninhabited—and moreover studded with lakes—it is highly likely that many of the "probables," either through falling into a lake or simply through falling into an uninhabited district as large as an English county, could never be claimed as certainties because there was no one there to confirm them.

The record of fifteen-to-one stands, therefore, as an under-statement rather than an exaggeration. And of the rest of the Wing flying, the escorts to Russian bombers that our pilots were asked to do more and more towards the end of the stay, between 30 and 40 in all, there is this to be said—and it was said by a Russian bomber-pilot:—"When the Hurricanes are escorting us, we never even bother to look up overhead. We concentrate on going straight on to our objectives." There could be no higher praise of one Ally by another. During all the time of the escort-patrols, the Wing never lost a Russian bomber. . . .

On the whole, in its way, both in its teaching and in its demonstration, the Expedition was a small classic of a manœuvre. It would be interesting to have access to Russian confidential reports on the matter; but it is difficult to believe that, in the ticklish business of first liaison with a new Ally, we would have been found in any major matter to have put a foot wrong.

* * * * *

So much for the technical aspect of the expedition. But, as always, there remained a lot else. As always,

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character, minor event, irrelevant incident, jokes, nonsense, and the sheer surprise of the unexpected and significant, stand out as much as any major happenings. Members of the Wing do remember, very vividly, one of our bomber-escorts landing after it had been "jumped" by the enemy, and had turned and fought its way out, shooting down three Huns in the process. But they remember almost equally vividly the Russian General arriving for a business conference, and bringing with him a baby-reindeer as a present for our Commanding-Officer; and our C.O. dashing about in the snow with the reindeer before returning to resume serious work; and the cheerful laughter, at all times and on all occasions, of certain young pilot-officers echoing down the corridors of the gaunt barrack building that was our officers'-quarters and that we called the "Kremlin"; and the walks across the gleaming snow among the silver-birch trees to the Mess for meals; and the Russian steam-baths in the local wooden-built Russian village; and the friendliness and co-operation of ninety-nine per cent. of every hundred Russians that we met—if it were said a hundred per cent. it would not be far wrong.

And we remember also a farewell lunch-party given by our C.O. in the "Kremlin." There were present the Russian General of Aviation who had been responsible for us during the whole of our stay, and a British Admiral, and several high British Naval officers; and we remember the toasts, our own C.O. giving, in very few words, the health of Joseph Stalin, and the grey-headed, spare-built Russian General giving "the King"—and remember feeling that this was an occasion, light in its way, but of extraordinary significance.

For these were no speeches of mere politicians—lip-service, politeness, "tact," call it what you will; but the words of commanding-officers in the field—men who had had to rely on one another and trust one another, to the extent of life-and-death, for several months past.

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The Russian General, if he had given mistaken orders to the Wing, might by his commands have jeopardized the lives of English pilots. Our own pilots, with their own lives, had protected the lives of Russian bomber-pilots. One does not get meaningless phrases talked between men who have collaborated in the field. The short speeches represented the culmination of something that had taken months for its building up.

* * * * *

The following narrative is mostly in diary form. It gives the day-to-day happenings of the Wing, from its first (slightly dazed) assembling at a Yorkshire aerodrome in August, its voyage and re-assembling (for it arrived by different and various routes) at its aerodrome in Russia ; the months that followed ; what we ate, how we lived, what the Russians said to us, and what we—as far as language allowed—tried to say to the Russians ; the place we lived in ; and our mode of life.

If it is unimportant, we can only say that we were the first of all British Air Forces to arrive in Russia—we were unique and unprecedented in our own way ; and that for this reason alone, most of us found it interesting.

CHAPTER II

ASSEMBLY

August, *Peak Moor, Yorkshire.*
Friday

Arrived after a comparatively hellish night journey. Overslept in the train and was carried as far north as Darlington. Transport gets me from Waverley to Peake Moor about the middle of the morning.

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Yesterday I had an Air Ministry telegram that said very much in very few words :—" F/Lt. H. G. will report forthwith as Wing-Adjutant to No. 151 (Fighter) Wing for service overseas." Being on leave at the time, I rang up my Station, a Recruits Training Centre, in Lancashire, to ask what the signal might mean. Reply :—" Can't tell you anything over the telephone. But it's probably the job you asked for." Hush-hush and silence descend. But Soviet Russia had entered the war a few weeks previously ; knowing Russia from many peace-time expeditions there, I had immediately asked to be sent to Russia in any capacity, if any of the R.A.F. were going in that direction—and the Air Ministry telegram was evidently an answer to my request. A Fighter Wing is being sent to Russia.

First glimpse of the Yorkshire Station—built on the lines of scores of Fighter stations scattered up and down the country :—large luxurious mess-rooms and living-rooms, acres of scattered barrack-blocks, stores-buildings, hangars ; and an aerodrome that seems to stretch away over the horizon. The air is black with flying Hurricanes and Spits ; the hangars agog with mechanics servicing them ; the floors of the hangars slippery with engine-oil from sumps.

"Что-то слышится родное"

(A celebrated line of Russian poetry, meaning " something of long familiarity sounds in the ear "—or in other words, " I have been there before.") After nearly a year spent in training recruits, with all the button-cleaning and parade-ground drill involved, it is like a month's holiday even to be in the atmosphere of an operational station again.

I am set to work immediately, because everyone else of the projected Wing for overseas (not the residential operational squadrons of the station) is either already away on leave, or going away on leave—the Commanding-

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Officer (already away), the S/Ldr. Admin. who has been helping to get the Wing together, all the clerks, all the airmen, all the pilots, and the two Squadron-Commanders. It's very foxing to find that everybody seems to know much more of the projected business of the Wing than I do, but no doubt one will catch up in the end. Also, exciting to be in the new surroundings.

Saturday

A dull day. Everyone (of our own racket) now away on embarkation leave. We got the last of the five hundred and fifty of them away yesterday afternoon. It took a bit of doing—they each have to have three separate documents signed by an officer—leave-passes, and railway-warrants, and rations-cards—and the mass-emigration almost choked up the local railway-station.

Monday

Nothing doing—except that the Wing is gradually re-forming. There are a few absentees, small in proportion to the total number, and remembering that many of the airmen have to get to and return from enormous distances within forty-eight hours. In the end all except one reports.

Tuesday

Life on a Fighter station is extraordinary—after months of Training Command, in one of the so-called beauty-spots of Lancashire. Everyone here wears whatever he likes. Everyone does (after the day's duty is over) whatever he likes. It is like a dream of heaven after the strict (if necessary) disciplinarian routine. A single example :—there is a strict R.A.F. rule throughout the whole of Training Command that no one except a Commanding-Officer or a qualified transport-driver shall drive a Service vehicle. Here—one is expected to get into a Snipe and drive it all over the place if only

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the prosecution of the war will be helped thereby by a couple of seconds.

Wednesday

How *quiet* the boys keep !—an impression that one continually gets on R.A.F. operational stations. Today the Resident Squadrons of the Station shot down a J.U.88 when out on patrol over the North Sea. No one said anything about it. Late in the evening one of the Station Intelligence-Officers was airing a grievance that his story of the combat, in rough, had got through to Fighter Command in a quarter-of-an-hour, and that the story, complete, had been through in an hour. His complaint was that Fighter Command had not thought this quick enough. This was the only indication from any of them—this personal squawk from the Intelligence-Officer—that anything at all had happened. Otherwise, I should have known nothing at all—nor anyone else.

Hectic Air Ministry signals continue to come in as regards a few additional postings to the Wing. "Air Ministry to Sutton Valence :—Dispatch immediately by road to Peake Moor two sergeant-pilots complete with parachutes, Mae Wests, and dinghies." "From Sutton Valence to Air Ministry :—Two sergeant-pilots with parachutes, Mae Wests and dinghies despatched by road 28-7-41." Another signal crossing this :—"Air Ministry to Sutton Valence :—Please confirm immediately two sergeant-pilots, parachutes, Mae Wests, dinghies, despatched by road Peake Moor," . . . and so on and so forth. Is the celebrated Hollywood film-star gratified to know that she has an honoured place in the routine R.A.F. code-book ?

Thursday

The formation of the Wing goes on—in its own curious fashion. (The Wing was technically "formed," when the Wing Commander arrived on July 28th, took over,

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and gave himself and some other pilots some leave.) The Wing-Commander returned from his own leave a couple of days ago, and yesterday morning met most of his pilots and most of his senior officers in the empty crew-room (down on the fringes of the aerodrome) that has been allotted to us as a Wing-Office. I shall long remember one curious feature of this first official getting-together, where met for the first time, as complete strangers, so many people that were ultimately to get to know one another infinitely better. The Winko himself was sitting there in his official chair of office, thumbing through the multitude of telegrams and instructions that had come in during his short absence ; and his officers were one by one coming in to be presented to him—and in the background one of his Squadron-Leaders and a couple of pilots were engaged in chalking, on a huge wall-blackboard with the names of all the Wing-Officers on it, a nickname for each against each—either the nicknames that they knew from past service together, or the nicknames that they thought would later come into use. It seemed a curious and casual way of conducting what was after all at least a semi-official occasion ; but I noticed that the Wing-Commander, in between his reading of the telegrams and his shrewd summing-up glances at newcomers, was not displeased with it, and appeared to have the situation admirably in hand.

About midday today Air Ministry rang up and asked him " if he could find it convenient to be at a Conference in Whitehall at 3.0 p.m." His instinctive reaction must have been " Hell, do you think I'm living somewhere just round the corner from you ? " However, he agreed ; lunched in the Mess, flew a Spitfire to Northolt, got a car from there to Air Ministry—and arrived five minutes *early* for the Conference. Pretty good going, seeing that he had come down from Yorkshire ! He was back, having drinks before dinner with his Command in the ante-room, by 6.0 p.m.

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He is a New Zealander, thirty-sixish, grey-haired, with a mouth that shuts like a steel trap. He is a test-pilot of long standing, and has probably forgotten more about flying than many young R.A.F. pilots have yet learnt. Also, he seems to like a joke.

Friday

A very good party happened in the Mess tonight, of which more shall be recorded in a moment. The resident Squadrons on the station got two Huns today. One of the two resident Squadrons is almost entirely Czech, with a few English officers.

Saturday

The re-assembled Wing had a little route march this morning, by way of a change. I had suggested it for the ground-troops, partly to be annoying, partly to give the ground-troops something to do to keep them occupied. The Wing-Commander had thought it a first-rate idea, and had approved of it enthusiastically—adding the rider that not only every airman of the Wing, but every senior N.C.O. and every pilot and sergeant-pilot was to go on the march. Hence a pleasant summer morning's walk through the green Yorkshire lanes for everybody—most people grumbling furiously at the time (for route-marching is not supposed to figure in the normal routine of Hurricane pilots) and nearly everyone admitting afterwards that they had quite enjoyed themselves. (Viewed in a four-months' later retrospect, this route-march turns out to have been curiously prophetic. One of the last doings of one section of the Wing on Russian soil was a route-march down to a waiting ship, the winter roads having been frozen into a state of icy slipperiness when no mechanical transport of any sort could function; when one airman participating fell down and broke his elbow; and when his pack was taken up for him and carried by a marching Hurricane pilot.)

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Sunday

The Advance Party, that should have moved off this morning, has not moved off. Postponement orders have come through. Typical of all overseas drafts and their movements. . . .

A V.C. Squadron-Leader, a guest-visitor, turns up to supper in the Mess. He has the gift of the gab. He talks incessantly from 6.0 o'clock to the end of the evening, without ever once closing his trap—and very good, amusing, informative talk most of it is. The legend of the " strong, silent man " dies hard. It is time it was killed.

> " *Napoleon never stopped talking from the cradle to the grave, and left three hundred volumes of correspondence.*"
> *Vide* Philip Guedalla.

And why not? It is a pleasure to hear such people as crack modern fighter-pilots talk. I think two in particular of the pilots who are coming with us, the Rook's (major and minor—one a Squadron-Leader, the other, his cousin, a Flight-Commander) will be very good value for money. Squadron-Leader Rook is tall, about six-foot-one, with a ferocious up-twirling black moustache, and a chin like the Philip IV of Velasquez. He looks almost too much like a stage fighter-pilot to be true, but has a very creditable record in the Battle of Britain. His cousin (who religiously calls him " sir " in Mess) is even taller, about six-foot-four, and has charmingly kindly and easy manners. I prophesy, after only the shortest of acquaintance with them, that the two will loom large on the 151 Wing horizon—in its frozen Arctic wastes.

The region of the Wing's ultimate destination, Murmansk, has already become a pretty general rumour. Murmansk—can anyone believe it?

To revert to the party which was touched on above :—

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In an over-worked R.A.F. term, it was wizard ; meaning that it was extremely good. It had a unique quality about it. Up to a point it was exactly like all other R.A.F. Mess-parties—with a certain amount of drinking, noise, and general rowdiness—but then had come in the individual and foreign elements. The Czechs and the Poles had been there ! There had been the Czech Spitfire squadron, and some attached Poles, and they had been in residence on the Station for some time. We may have taught them our songs, but they have certainly taught us theirs. A Czech Squadron-Leader, a pilot with decorations, is a real performer on the violin—a rare accomplishment in an English Mess ; he can accompany with absolute truth any tune that is sung to him—and he can also keep us true in our own singing—and if you had heard the singing in most R.A.F. Messes you would appreciate the difference.

About 11.0 p.m., suddenly, as though by magic, a change came over the Mess :—everyone (unpremeditated) took off his tunic and collar, everyone pulled out his shirt and tied his tie round his waist over his shirt as a belt, converting the shirt into a colourable imitation of a Russian peasant-blouse—and there, in a trice, was a complete ante-room full of Russian *muzhiks* singing away like anything, grouped round a Czecho-Slovakian fiddle. . . . There should have been a photograph of the scene. It would have been unbelievable as referring to an English Mess.

The resident English squadrons were asked if they had done the same trick before on party-nights, and if it were the recognized local " drill " ; but they assured us that it had been the first time, and was quite spontaneous. The party, like many other R.A.F. parties, was given about nothing in particular ; it " happened " rather than had been planned, and indeed, had not even been thought about till half-way through the evening. But in its spontaneous way it was one of the pleasantest.

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F/Lt. Ross* of No. 134 Squadron (coming with us), one of the smallest pilots ever to fly a Hurricane, being only about four-foot tall, was hoisted on to the enormously tall mantelpiece in the ante-room. He couldn't get up any higher, and he couldn't by his own unaided efforts get down, for the mantelpiece was about twice as high as himself. He had to stay there and make a speech to the assembled company—which he did with perfect nonchalance, as though he had been making speeches from mantelpieces all his life.

Monday

Movement as last. The Advance-Party, F/Lt. Rook, F/Lt. Cottam, and 23 airmen move off early by road to one of our subsidiary ports of embarkation, time 5.30 a.m.

I get up in the dews of dawn to see them off and they all seem in good form. Our turn, that of the Main Party, is to come tonight.

Parade for the whole Wing, 6 p.m., in the big No. 1 hangar, where all the airmen dump their kit, are roll-called and checked over, and then dismissed till their supper at 10 o'clock. Parade again to get them distributed into lorries, about 11.30 p.m.

The train moves off from Waverley Station at 2 a.m.; arrives at main port of embarkation after a jolting night-journey, 7 a.m. Embarkation in an old liner, mid-morning. Quarters comfortable. Troops in good form.

The main *Flying Party*, S/Ldrs. Rook and Miller and the main body of actual flying-boys (the squadron pilots) have had no definite movement-instructions as yet, and are treating themselves to a few extra days leave.

* * * * *

The general composition of the R.A.F. formation known as a "Wing," with its Wing-Headquarters and its com-

* Later decorated with the D.F.C., and killed in action out in the Atlantic after his return to Britain from Russia.

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ponent couple or more squadrons, had better here be explained for the enlightenment of the non-expert :—

An R.A.F. Wing consists of two or more squadrons—in this case two squadrons, Nos. 81 and 134—and a Wing-Headquarters Unit. The two squadrons have each their own squadron-commander, each their own flight-commanders, their thirty or so pilots to fly the fighter aircraft, and a ground-personnel of about a hundred airmen to do the work of keeping them in the air. The Wing Headquarters has its Wing-Commander (the Commanding-Officer of the entire force), his Wing-Adjutant (a sort of staff-and-administrative officer), its Medical personnel, Equipment personnel, Signals personnel, its Engineer-Officer and his Maintenance Unit, its Transport Section with its drivers and mechanics ; its staff of cypher-officers ; and its run of ordinary " aircraft-hands "—i.e., non-technical personnel who are there to do the general fatigues and chores of the Camp—in all, for Wing-Headquarters, about three hundred and fifty bodies. Total of combined Wing and Squadron personnel —about five hundred and fifty.

At the moment the complete Wing is to proceed as stated : almost all ground-personnel, both of Wing Headquarters and Squadrons, in the liner. The Advance Party, with certain important stores, goes in an old Dutch cargo-boat. Later, in its journeyings between our point of disembarkation, Archangel, and our point of arrival, Murmansk, the Wing, owing to the exigencies of the Service, got split up still further, and finally arrived Archangel-Murmansk by seven different routes. Some made the journey by air, some by British Destroyers, some by Russian Destroyers, some by a Russian cargo-vessel, two more instalments (myself included) by Russian railway-train in a journey that took so long that Time itself seemed to have become static and immortal. . . . But for the moment, the parties are clear and distinct—three.

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To revert to the assembly-period—the period of waiting in the last ten days has been, understandably, a difficult time. The whole Wing had its short 48-hour embarkation leave more than a week ago, and then had to come pelting back to Peake Moor expecting to have to move off at any moment. Then, as the days went by, the Wing still didn't get its movement-order. The troops began to feel that, as they weren't to move (or at least *hadn't* moved) for a week, they might at least have been given a little more than 48-hours. A difficult period, but common to all formations waiting to go out on overseas drafts.

Even if they had been able to be given a second period of embarkation-leave, it would probably have been an anticlimax as regards the home and domestic circle. As the C.O. sapiently puts it :—" What's the use of any more leave any way ; it upsets the wives too much. They've said good-bye once, and had a good cry, and straightened themselves up again. If the troops come back on another leave, all the wives will be able to say is " Good heavens, here's that man again ! " How true.

One thing in the past week has impressed me a lot—the friendliness and co-operation of the Air Ministry officials. As Wing-Adjutant—with the C.O. often called away to attend to various matters—I have had to telephone the Air Ministry authorities continually—sometimes two and three times in a morning, and again two or three times the same afternoon. Always friendly and co-operative voices have answered at the other end :—" If you're in any doubt or difficulty, give us a call here. We're here to help you. Don't be afraid of ringing." No doubt this is precisely the attitude that high staff-officers *should* adopt to their juniors—but it is all the same very pleasant (and helpful) to find it actually being carried out.

Tuesday

The vessel pulls up the hook and sails out into the windy estuary at about 2 p.m.

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CHAPTER III

VOYAGE

August

The voyage to Archangel needs no day-to-day narration, for it lasted more than a couple of weeks, and all the days except the first and the last of them, were singularly alike.

The route followed made a wide northern sweep, so wayward as to be reminiscent of Chesterton's " the night we went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head," but doubtless wise in all the circumstances. At one time a school of whales (three in number) was observed, spouting. At another time the route followed went so far north that (the time being still August) the sun hardly set at all : walking round the boat-deck at midnight the rim of the sun was seen to have set just below the horizon, and half an hour later it was on the point of rising. (This time it was an inverse anticipation of what was to follow. When the Wing left Murmansk at the beginning of December the " Arctic day " had so far been converted into the " Arctic night " that even round about midday the sun only by its reflections lightened up the snow. There was about three hours daylight instead of twenty-three.)

The liner had been but partially converted into a troop-ship—that is to say, her living quarters remained comfortable and uncrowded, alike for officers and troops. She had recently re-victualled in Cape Town ; delicacies scarce or unknown in England for a year or more, grape-fruit, jam, butter, eggs, the choice of half-a-dozen dishes for breakfast, remained on her menus. The routine for the troops was idleness and well-being, except for a few daily duties. There was a daily " Commanding-Officer's inspection " of quarters, as in usual troop-ship routine, when everything in the airmen's quarters had to be cleaned up and straightened down ; but apart from that there was very little to occupy their time, which was

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filled in with deck-games, some boxing, evening concerts, and the ever popular " Housey-House."

The liner was further unlike a troop-ship in that she carried a couple of dozen civilian passengers—the members of the Polish Legation, and their ladies with them, going out to Moscow ; members of the Czecho-Slovakian mission going out to Moscow ; Vernon Bartlett, M.P. ; Mrs. Charlotte Haldane ; Wallace Carrol, the American journalist, all going in the same direction ; and Topolsky, the Polish artist, skipping about the ship like a cheerful gnome, and never ceasing drawing.

It was decided to offer to the five hundred troops aboard a series of lectures, to fill in their spare time if they cared to attend. Attendance was entirely voluntary, but it turned out that everyone wanted to hear them ; and the main dining-saloon, that accommodated only two hundred and fifty, was made to do a double duty : there was a morning session of lectures at 11 o'clock, with a repeat of the lecture, for all those who had not been able to get in, at three o'clock in the afternoon.

The civilian contingent, being practised speakers, gave admirable lectures, each on his or her own subject, ranging from Mrs. Haldane's " Domestic Life in Russia," to Vernon Bartlett's " The General European Set-Up "—a sketch of prevailing European conditions. Each lecturer commented on the intelligence and directness of the questions fired at them by their audience of R.A.F. listeners. A series of three lectures was give by an officer of the Wing who had been born in, and lived much of his life in, the Russia of the Tsars, F/Lt. Hodson ; and I gave a lecture (with a special purpose) on Soviet Russia from an historical standpoint.

As it explains and interprets many of the events that follow in this short narrative, the gist of the argument can be given :—

" With the exception of two or three of its interpreters and staff officers, the Wing is going out to a new country

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for the first time. All will have read something about Russia. Ninety-nine per cent. of everything that anybody will have read will have been biased—either exaggerated adulation from writers who pretend that everything in Modern Russia is an earthly Paradise—or else exaggerated detraction, pretending, in past years, that Russia is largely governed by lunatics, fanatics, and incompetents.

"But there is one historical 'key' which, if it is remembered well, may help us all in understanding much that we see and much that we come across in the next few months. It is this :—we are going to what was up to twenty-five years ago—a single generation ago—the most backward country in Europe by *some two or three or four hundred years*. This is not a matter of fancy. It is a matter of fact. The last French Ambassador to the Court of the Tsars, M. Paléologue, was a personal friend of the Tsar, and a believer in the old *régime*, and the last person in the world to be called a revolutionary. And yet he says, and repeats more than once in his 'Memoirs,' written about 1914, 'Russia is *not* a European country like other European countries, merely twenty or thirty or forty years behind the times. It is like the rest of Europe —as the rest of Europe was before the French Revolution, before the Reformation of the sixteenth century, before the Renaissance of the fourteenth century.' He thinks the phrase important enough to repeat it more than once in his diaries of the time. He puts the country, on an average, as being many hundred years out of date—back in the dark ages.

"Now how can we check up on this extraordinary statement? We can check it up by historical facts. In the year 1914, 90 per cent. of the Russian population was illiterate—90 per cent. of all the Russian peasant-soldiers, going to fight against Germany, could not read, could not spell out the simplest placard—and did not know if the "Germany" that they were fighting against was a man or a woman or a thing. . . . (In England we have

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had some sort of Compulsory Education Act for about sixty years.)

"In 1914, the Russian effort at a Parliament, the 'Duma,' had been in existence only eight years, since 1906—and of those eight years several of them had been spent with the Duma dissolved—because it did not agree exactly with the Tsar's policy. In other words, in all of the centuries of Russian history, the people had only been represented with a Parliament for less than ten years. (In England there had been a parliament with a continually-increasing influence since Simon de Montfort's in 1265 !)

"Last and most convincing fact of all :—'Serfdom,' i.e., slavery, the condition when peasants 'belonged' to the landowner, and were bought and sold with his land just like his cattle—was the general law of the land in Russia up to the year 1861—up to within three generations ago, up to within living memory. Just think of that ! It means that there are still a few very old people in the country that we are going to, the few people who are now eighty years old or more, who were actually born under 'serfdom,' and can probably even remember serfdom—for serfdom was only abolished eighty-one years ago. It means that at the present moment there are thousands and thousands of middle-aged people in Russia whose parents were serfs ; and millions and millions of people, probably the majority of all living Russians, whose grandparents were serfs. In an historical perspective, to talk about serfdom in Russia is like talking about something that in England was still happening late in the reign of Queen Victoria. (But England abolished its own version of serfdom about the fourteenth century—that is to say about five hundred years ago.)

"From these three facts alone it will be seen that it is pretty generally accurate to talk about Russia as having been at least several *centuries* out of date at the time when

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the new Government came into power—twenty-five years ago. Is that point granted?

"What is the use of making it now? There is this use:—It may help us to see in right perspective a little of what we are going to see.

"It is obvious that there has been an enormous advance, almost inconceivable in its power and speed and wide scope, in the last twenty-five years. We are now going to a country that is so industrialized and organized and educated that it has been able to put into the field an Army that fights on equal terms with Hitler's—the only army in Europe that has been able to do this—the *combined* European armies of France and England in 1940 not excepted. . . . This means that the country must have been made modernly 'efficient' to an extent that is staggering to the imagination, in martial science and industrial science and educational science (for all these things go to making an army that can beat Hitler's).

"But—by just the same token—don't believe that *everything* can have been done in those short twenty-five years—or that everything can have been done equally well.

"We all know that we are going to a point near Murmansk—that is to say, a point somewhere within the Arctic Circle—a point in the Russian Empire that is about equivalent (in the British Empire) to somewhere in the Outer Hebrides, a land of no luxury, and only the barest civilization, either by modern standards or any other standards.

"If anybody has been misguided enough to tell you that modern Russia is a land flowing with milk and honey, please believe that the milk and honey is not likely to extend so far as the Outer Hebrides of Russia. We are going to what we—with normal English standards—would call a rather 'poor' land, for it has been putting half its National Budget for years past into the demands of creating the Army that is now beating Hitler's; and we are going to see only the outer rim of it—just as though

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a Russian Wing were suddenly going to be billeted for a few months in a place called Scapa or Stornoway.

"If by any chance you have read papers, and seen pictures, dealing with modern Russian architecture, culture, science, beauty, leisure—forget it! With regard to where we are going, it is possible that we will have a camp of wooden huts, set down in a mud-flat—and seeing the geographical situation that we will be in, we will have to grin and pretend that we like it. (It is possible that this would be just about what we would be able to give a Russian air-force Wing that had to camp down, with us, for a few autumn and winter months, in Northern Scotland or Skye.)

"The Russians seem to be doing the fighting—and to be doing it pretty well. Let that suffice for the moment. And that alone is some claim on our good temper and gratitude."

The lecture had a purpose, other than mere filling in time. It was intended to prepare the troops for some pretty rough living. If living conditions turned out better than anticipated, no harm would have been done. The troops would merely be agreeably disappointed.

The voyage draws to an end. The Convoy heads south. Next day the liner arrived at Archangel. The voyage is at an end. Lectures, idleness, late breakfasts, are all at an end! In the morning there will be movement, and movement in a big way.

The Wing, after its holiday on board ship, will have to become mobile—rapidly.

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CHAPTER IV

ARCHANGEL—MURMANSK

September 1st to 9th

As anticipated, activity of a strenuous kind began immediately the main vessel completed her docking at one of the wooden wharfs, among miles of other wooden wharfs.

The first business of all was a Conference aboard a Russian Admiralty Yacht. The yacht was an extremely smart, newly-built motor-vessel about the size of a British Naval sloop, a wonder of white paint-work, polished brass, and polished satin-wood in the Admiral's cabin. Present at the Conference: Air Vice-Marshal Collier from Moscow (the Russian-speaking head of the British Air Mission), the Russian Rear-Admiral (young-looking, probably about 40), two British Naval Liaison officers, the Wing-Commander of No. 151 Wing, his two technical experts (his Wireless and Engineer officers), and his Wing Adjutant, myself.

The Conference was of pressing interest to all concerned because: (*a*) immediate action was imperative; and (*b*) all preconceived notions of what was to happen had suddenly fallen to the ground. During the voyage the Wing-Commander had tentatively worked out a plan by which, if the Wing was not met on arrival by the Moscow authorities, it would proceed in its own transport, in relays, by road, to Murmansk—if there happened to be any roads in that part of the world. (This plan was negatived from the moment of landing, because there didn't happen to be any roads.) The plan already clear-cut in the heads of the Moscow authorities was that the Wing should proceed instantly to Murmansk in a series of special trains that had already been requisitioned (but this plan in its turn was negatived by the news,

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received the day that the Wing landed, that the Kandalaksha-Murmansk railway—see map for this—had been temporarily put out of action by an enemy bomb-raid the previous night).

Problem : " What does ' A ' do ? "—' A ' standing for the Wing, with its imperative necessity of getting at least some of its personnel, particularly its wireless personnel and equipment, to Murmansk with the minimum of delay ?

In the circumstances, a plan had to be hatched out that combined all available resources of air and sea (and rail when repaired) :—a small party of those immediately needed went by two aircraft, leaving the next day and the day following ; another party of 200, under the Wing-Commander, went by two Royal Naval destroyers a couple of days later direct to Murmansk-Vianga (Vianga being the aerodrome, fifteen miles outside Murmansk, that was our ultimate home. This party made the journey comfortably in 22 hours.) On the fourth and fifth days, yet another party went by Russian tramp-steamer to Kandalaksha, and thence by train to Vianga ; and two more parties of about a hundred each left to undertake the journey by train over the by now repaired permanent-way. These were by no means so lucky, and took three complete days and nights for the journey. A couple of Russian destroyers also figured in these complicated manœuvres ; and yet one other party, of expert technicians, was left at Archangel under the Engineer-Officer, to complete the task of erecting the Hurricanes that had been brought out in crates with the Convoy. (The doings of this last party, lodged on an ancient paddle-steamer nicknamed the Winkle-Barge, is given a short section to itself later.)

The ramifications of the Wing on its first and last Russian cross-country journey are thus too varied to be followed in detail. Those who went by sea suffered no worse than twenty-two hours aboard the decks of British

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or Soviet Destroyers, cutting through a calm sea. Of those who went by air, one party, flying in a big undefended Douglas, was turned back by the proximity of hostile aircraft, and made the journey without incident the next day. The town of Archangel remained a smudge on the northern horizon, and thus plays no part in the Wing's history. First contact with the Russian civilian and general population—the first " impact " of the Wing with its feet on Russian soil—is recorded in the notes of two officers, one who helped in some timber-shifting, and myself who made the three-day-and-nights train journey.

The first officer wrote :—" Standing on the deck of the transport one afternoon, while waiting to get orders to move up, the last day that the troopship was in port, I saw a couple of old Russian lumber-men and a party of a dozen Russian girls sawing up and loading timber into lorries as they arrived at the dockside. After they had loaded up all the timber that was in sight, they moved off to the next railway-shed, and from the coming and going of lorries it was obvious that the sawing and loading up was still going forward. I thought after three weeks almost stationary existence on board ship, that I'd go ashore and get some exercise by helping. The party was under the command of a girl about twenty, a qualified engineer. They worked away for three hours like absolute fury, the engineer-girl working the hardest of the lot. No one was looking on or supervising—but the speed of the work was prodigious. Once a lorry was loaded up with sawn timber, the girls would sit down for a breather and start smoking and singing. And then, when another lorry would come up, they'd start in all over again. About half-way through the loading and sawing I felt that I had strained every muscle of my body, and my hands were raw with working a two-handed saw—but every time I sat down for a rest, there would appear another girl at the end of a log weighing half a ton and waiting to be helped carry it, or another girl waiting

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for someone to help her saw it in half—and back one would have to go to the treadmill of labour out of pure shame—explaining that one had been three weeks aboard ship, and one was not quite in one's natural athletic condition. . . .

"The whole thing was, on their part, a marvellous exhibition of enthusiasm, energy and concentration. When they had finished loading every piece of timber in sight, they got to and swept down the whole quay-side (including all the rubbish chucked off the transport), a task which took an hour, and then buzzed off home. One had at last seen Russians at work, unwatched. Or rather—certain Russians at work unwatched. If there is anybody in Russia among the 'higher-ups' making mistakes and blunders—and by what the Russian army is doing there is no evidence that any higher-ups are making mistakes and blunders—there is evidently a terrific mine of enthusiasm and energy backing the war effort among the 'lower-downs.' This I have seen with my own eyes."

The second narration is my own experiences of the train journey :—

"*Aboard the Archangel-Murmansk train—first day out from home* :—

"The 'Movement Order' got out by the Wing for this particular party was even more crazy than most Movement Orders might be expected to be in this part of the world. It stated that the party will move 'provisionally tomorrow, Sept. 7th'—but actually we didn't know if the train would be ready yesterday or next Tuesday fortnight. It stated, for the information of the victims, that the journey "is *expected* to take from two to three days, but this may be extended to six days or more. . . ." In other words, nobody knows a thing—and we have been given a week's rations for luck—a week's rations for a journey that is only three hundred miles as

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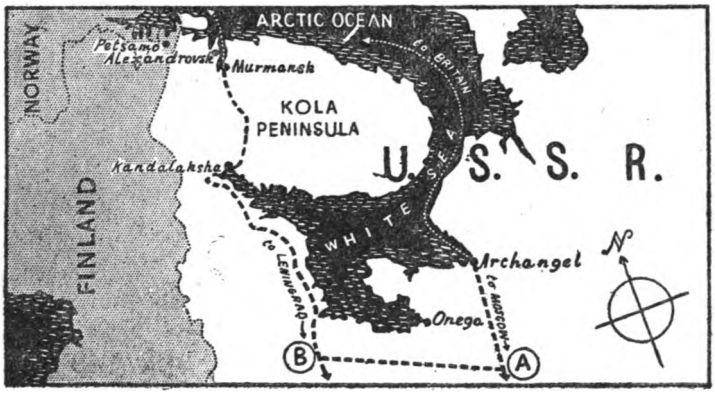
the crow flies, a distance equivalent of from London to Carlisle !

" The expected length of time can be explained, of course, by a glance at the map and a knowledge of local conditions. It can be seen that the three hundred miles in a bee-line across the White Sea becomes at least six hundred in going round by land. Nor is this the whole trouble. The first, *downward* part of the journey, follows the well-established Archangel-Moscow railway. The



last, *upward*, part of the journey follows the well-established Leningrad-Kandalaksha-Murmansk railway. But to get across from one to the other one needs the newly-built single-line track, laid across approximately two hundred miles of sandy soil between the points 'A' and 'B.' This bit of line is so recently-built as to appear on none of the usual maps in any detail, and we only know its vague point-to-point direction. Two things only are certain about it :—one, that trains have to proceed very slowly on it ; and two, that as it is single-line, there may be any amount of delay while our train is held up for other trains to pass. Urgent supply-trains

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are being sent up the line towards the Front, and hospital-trains are coming down. We will have to pull into sidings to let through both kinds. Well—two days or six—it is all part of the campaign's unexpectedness. . . .

" The landscape is dull and monotonous—sand-dunes, low lines of hills, stunted birch-trees, low, heavy clouds. The weather is still quite warm, the equivalent of normal English autumn weather. Bully-beef and bread for supper. Go off to sleep.

Next day

" Awake feeling as though stretched on a rack. There are only two passenger-coaches on the train, and they are both " Hard class," which means, in Russia, extremely hard, plain deal boards to stretch out on, which after a night-time feel as though they were made of immortal ebony. The train is as full as it can go, and to ease the situation of bunks among the troops, I have taken a sergeant and a batman to share my compartment. We have fifty palliasses stuffed with straw for distribution among about 100 airmen—therefore make the men draw lots for who gets a palliasse and who does not—while having to pretend that I, as an officer, am loftily superior to discomfort and like going without a palliasse anyhow. Lunch today, tinned stew heated over spirit-cookers. At odd intervals the train pulls into a siding or wayside station, and then Russian railway officials rush aboard bearing large cans of boiling-hot water (" *kipiatók* ") and we get tea going. The train's maximum speed, going along the newly-laid line, seems to be a poor 15 m.p.h. ; the train's usual is just a little faster than a walking-pace. For light in the evenings there are a couple of candles stuck in the corridor outside each compartment.

Halted about an hour this afternoon, opposite a Russian hospital-train coming down from the line. The cordiality of a great reunion ! All the Russian army very much with their tails up. Grins, and exchanges between the

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The General Officer Commanding the Soviet Air Force which co-operated with the R.A.F. Wing in Russia

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Hero of the Soviet Union, Captain Safonov (*right*) chats with British pilots

Flight Lieut. V. Cottam and Capt. Andrushin watch a take-off from Control Point

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troops of chocolate and peppermints and cigarettes. I have been trying to learn a little of the Russian language in recent years in England. Nothing astonishes me so much as to find that I can both understand and be understood, to a certain limited extent. But it is a genuine pleasure to be able to explain, even in elementary Russian, that "we are the R.A.F. arriving"—and to find that they are very pleased to have us arrive. Bully-beef, biscuits, tinned damsons to eat in our train. The Russian nurses in the hospital-train wear white overalls, wide grins, and look very competent. The Russian soldiers, in their slings and bandages, make the universal sign for "thumbs up," and grin also. Landscape unchanging—firs, pines, sand, and low hills.

Third day out

Food still stew and biscuit. No clothes are taken off at night, because all clothes are needed against the hardness of the seats. A wash is a luxury. One has a shave once a day, in half a glass of cold water—and if it doesn't make one look thirty years younger, at least it makes one feel it.

A pleasant incident:—two Russian colonels travelling on the train invited me into their compartment last night to drink tea. They are types about thirty-eight or forty years old, clean and trim and smart and official—they give the feeling that they have only to whisper an order and the whole Russian staff of the train would be sent running for them. And yet . . . during that long midnight party yesterday evening in their compartment, which they also shared with a batman and a minor train-official, one could see the complete friendliness that existed between them all—each member of the party saying all he thought, discussing the situation freely and without constraint, cracking jokes, just as though ranks as between colonels and batmen did not exist. . . .

This is something that the Russians have achieved in

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twenty years—and that I don't know that we have even tried for yet. Late in the evening in the compartment there was the cooking of tins of soup held over a candle, one of the colonels being the chief cook and holding the tins in his fingers; and there was the batman talking away about the things he knew about, the lie of the local country and its customs—and there were the colonels, gents., in the best sense of the term (chaps with good manners and good looks and good conversation) encouraging him to talk away as much as he liked; *and* there was still the feeling that those colonels, *on* their jobs, on parade, among their regiments, would have been as rigidly obeyed and listened to as any Grenadier Guards colonel. It was revealing; and I was glad to have been present at that mild, candle-lighted tea-party. It showed, among other things, that Afinogenov's play "*Distant Point*," a play that I translated several years ago, and that deals with the relationship of high Soviet officers with their subordinates—was no lie.

Met and pulled up alongside another Russian hospital train today. One of our airmen gets a tunic-button sewn on by a Russian nurse, with a crowd of about a hundred Russians looking on and applauding.

Fourth day out

I now ache so continuously that it has simply become a habit that one can forget about—or maybe this is what is called the process of "becoming hardened." Breakfast this morning, herrings out of a tin, and tea—the everlasting strong, sweet, kitchen-tea that the airmen adore. The Russians have been unfailingly good at providing us with hot water. A sergeant came into my compartment this morning and told me that he had never enjoyed a journey so much. I see what he means. It is a train journey such as few other Englishmen have ever experienced since the early days of trains, round about the year 1830. It's nice to know that he appreciated it.

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The "*garmonica*"—concertina—that one of the Russians provided our troops with early in the journey has never stopped playing.

A couple of young Russian officers got in with us last night. They couldn't speak a word of English, but got on like a house-afire with the airmen by sitting in their compartments and singing operatic airs to them accompanied by the squiffer. They were out to be extraordinarily friendly, and their music cheered up the tone of the train considerably. We are due to arrive this afternoon, after shunting about the sidings of Murmansk for a couple of hours at midday. The final seventeen-mile stage of the journey is accomplished by the train being pushed backwards up a steep winding track by a small tank-locomotive that seems to need to pause to take breath every few miles. The outskirts of the Camp at last, about four p.m. Get down off the train, boys! Off load! What a hot bath we'll have tonight—if there are such things as hot baths going. . . .

Two days later

The Camp turns out to be a Camp far away in the remotest country-side. Miles—not from the nearest town—but from the nearest village. Work ahead, eighteen or so hours a day, at unloading, and getting the Camp going. Very near the war again at last. . . .

Our pilot-boys have already been in action—with spectacular results; three Huns shot down for certain; one of our own is missing. It's worth putting on record that the Russians from the beginning have been extraordinarily good to us, treating us, including the least of our airmen (i.e., private soldiers), like honoured guests. And I've already heard one slightly astonished phrase from one of our pilots, who has seen a Russian anti-aircraft barrage in action:—"Well, I'm bloody glad

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they're on our side and not against us ! "—which is, to say the least of it, interesting.

Now to see what's going to happen at Vianga Camp, near Murmansk, within the Arctic Circle, North Russia.

CHAPTER V

INTERLUDE—THE WINKLE-BARGE

August

AN intermezzo now occurs. It is filled in with the doings of what was called the " Erection Party "—the Wing's Engineer-Officer (F/Lt. Gittins), Warrant-Officer Hards, and the gang of rank-and-file technical airmen, who were left behind at Archangel to uncrate and build a certain proportion of the Hurricanes that the Wing had brought out with it in the Convoy.

The Erection Party was billeted in an ancient river paddle-steamer, looking like something out of Mark Twain's " Life on the Mississippi," moored off Keg-Ostrov (" Keg Island ") on the side of the river opposite Archangel. The craft came to be nicknamed either the Missouri Scow, or, more frequently, the Winkle-Barge. Her lower deck contained billets for the troops—abandoned after one night, for reasons afterwards stated. Her upperdeck contained officers' cabins and a dining-saloon and kitchen. The vessel was always a centre of life—for high Russian officials, Colonels and Generals, used to frequent it to see the Hurricanes in process of erection. Lower-ranking Russian personnel were observed to be stroking the wings of the Hurricanes as they were assembled ashore. . . . The Russians like a new toy. They turned out to be extraordinarily efficient in the handling and manipulation of their own already-

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existing toys (as the Germans were in process of learning). But the Hurricane was, at that time, a quite new one on them. They knew its reputation. They anticipated its performance. And the technical expertness of the show given by our Winkle-Barge party was regarded by outside observers with something of the excitement of a circus-performance. It may be mentioned in passing that the Hurricanes-to-be-assembled were dumped about, folded up in their crates, in an uneven-lying mud flat; that each 4½-ton craft presented its own problem in the way of getting it into the neighbouring hangar; and that, partly owing to haste in loading the convoy in England, and partly to difficulties in unloading the convoy in Russia, many essential assembling-tools—airscrew spanners among them—were missing, and had to be improvised by rule-of-thumb methods by the Russians before assembly proper could start. In the event, the achievement of the small detachment in erecting and getting flying-fit fifteen Hurricanes in nine days, was a feat that let the Russians know that we meant to do business—and knew how to do business—from the very beginning.

The rough diary of the Engineer-Officer sketches in events as they occurred. It runs :—

September, 1941

First day

Party consisting of two officers, one warrant-officer, three flight-sergeants, two sergeants, and thirty airmen, left the liner at 9.20 a.m., and went upstream in a river-steamer, reached Keg-Ostrov Aerodrome 10.15. Wireless equipment for the ground-station was taken to the hangar, and party then proceeded to unpack one aircraft, the intention being to use the packing-case for W/T station. Unpacking began at 10.45, and by 11.45 the aircraft was clear of the case. All tools had to be borrowed from the Russian Engineer-Officer, who was extremely helpful.

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Midday-meal was taken at 12, and consisted of cabbage-soup, beefsteak and rice, with stewed fruit as dessert. At 1.30 work was resumed, one party taking second aircraft from case while the other party with the wireless personnel erected the W/T station. Petrol and oil were obtained from local sources, and by 2.30 accumulators were being charged. At 3.30 the second aircraft, complete with components, was being pushed up to the hangar. At 4.30 work ceased for tea—tea (Russian style) in a glass without milk, dark brown bread, and butter so pale that it looked like lard, but wasn't. 5 p.m., work begun on the third aircraft, and this was pushed into the hangar at 6.30. The W/T station was completed by 6.50 and attempts were made to contact the main station at Moscow, but nothing was heard from them. At 7 p.m., owing to lack of lifting-tackle, work ceased. Supper was taken, consisting of fried fresh pike, minced-meat cutlets, and cocoa. W/T personnel maintained watch from 7 o'clock to 11.30 and attempted to get in touch with base (Murmansk-Vianga), but without success. General reception was however very good. About one o'clock in the morning I was awakened by two airmen who had come up from the lower-deck of the Wingle-Barge covered with bumps and blood—stating that they had been bitten by some insect or other. Went down to their cabins and found the whole place alive with bugs. I made the men put the lights on in their cabins, and told them to leave the lights on all night.

(Working hours of day, 6½).

Second day

Work began at 8 a.m. and various attempts were made to lift the next aircraft, but we came to the conclusion that the safety-factor of the tackle provided was not large enough to take the risk. I managed to borrow three 1,000 kilo cranes, some cable, and some bolts. By making a three-point suspension, i.e., one from each of

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the upper front wing attachment-bolts, and the third from the front engine slinging-ring, we managed to lift the aircraft by winding up (by hand) on all three cranes together, and by 12.10 the aircraft was standing on its undercarriage. During the morning visits were made to the hangar by a number of high local Army and Navy Air Arm officers. At 12.15 lunch—potato soup, steak, roast potatoes and stewed fruit. At 1 p.m. work resumed on lifting the second aircraft, this completed by 2.5, and the third aircraft was pushed under the cranes. W/T kept constant watch for a call from Base, but without result. Armourers went ahead fitting Nos. 5 and 6 guns to all Hurricanes. The working-party was split into three gangs and carried on fitting tail-units, as it was not thought advisable to unpack any more aircraft owing to weather conditions (rain), and the lack of facilities to erect them. 4.30 tea—(Russian). 5 p.m. work resumed on the fitting of main-planes, and by 7 o'clock two aircraft had wings loosely bolted into position. Supper—ham, cucumber, etc.; and then work continued on wings of third aircraft. Owing to the vermin episode of the previous night, I asked for temporary accommodation elsewhere for the men so that the steamer could be disinfected. A house was found and prepared, and at 8.30 I went and inspected it, and found that it was very clean and comfortable but was rather a long way from the 'drome, about four miles. The Russian authorities immediately offered to provide two lorries and a car for our use. I accepted. At 11 p.m. the transport arrived, and the men took their small kit and went to their new sleeping-quarters.

(Working hours 12¾).

Third day

At 7 a.m. the men arrived from their billets for breakfast—smoked salmon, breakfast sausage (warm), and potatoes. Work began at 7.30 on the three aircraft with

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wings loosely fitted, and good progress was made until 12.15. Dinner consisted of potato-soup and meat—rissoles (by now called "Archangel-rissoles" by the airmen), potatoes and coffee. By 2.50 the fourth aircraft was removed from its case and undercarriage lowered and pushed into the hangar. Medical officer arrived to see one of our airmen suffering from tummy-trouble. Fifth aircraft taken from its case at 3.50 and pushed into the hangar. 4.30 tea, usual style, and work continued on aircraft in hangars. 7.00 supper—the weirdest dish yet, called Byelooga, which is minced meat wrapped in white cabbage leaves. After supper, main-planes of the fourth and fifth aircraft were fitted. Work on fitting airscrews was held up owing to the fact that the necessary spanners could not be found on the stores-ship, nor could sparking-plugs be fitted, for the same reason of lack of appropriate spanners. At 7.52 brief contact was established by the W/T with Base and the transmission lasted for six minutes, closing with the information that Base would call up at 10 a.m. tomorrow. Work ceased at 11 p.m.

(Working hours, 12¾).

Fourth day

Work began at 8 a.m., after a breakfast of ground-rice cutlets in butter gravy. I contacted the local engineer-officer, and asked him if he could produce two spanners if I gave him the necessary details. He said he would, so I sketched him what I wanted and gave him an airscrew for a sample to work to. Our own work mainly consisted of completing erection, and filling with coolant and oil. Dinner 12.15—cabbage-soup, steak and potatoes, and coffee. At 2 p.m., as the spanners had not arrived, we unpacked the sixth aircraft and brought it up to the hangar. Work continued on five aircraft getting them prepared for ground-test. 4 p.m. our engineer friend arrived with the spanners, and we went ahead and fitted

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Wing Commander Isherwood with the baby reindeer

Flight Lieut. V. Cottam, Wing Commander H. N G. Isherwood, and Capt. Andrushin

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" The Kremlin "

" The Operations Board " at Headquarters

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five airscrews and inlet sparking-plugs. Tea—usual. After tea I contacted the authorities and asked for some petrol and they promised it for 6 p.m. The petrol ("*bentzine*") arrived to time, with a chamois-leather funnel and a comic pump to extract it from the barrels. We managed to find out how the pump worked, and to fill the first aircraft. Excitement was by now really great among our Russian friends who were to see the first Hurricane engine actually running. At 8.35 we turned the engine over by starter-battery until the oil-gauge showed a movement. (We had to use this method as there were no facilities for making a priming-pump.) At 8.37 the main switches were put on and the engine sprang to life, all instruments reading correctly. There were plenty of cheers and clapping on the part of the spectators. The aircraft was pushed back into the hangar to have the final trimmings put on ready for the air-test tomorrow. Work ceased at 9.45 p.m. as the weekly bath for the men was arranged for 10 o'clock.

(Working hours, 11¾).

Fifth day

Work began at 8 a.m. but full programme could not be carried out as racing-launch had to be sent back to ship to bring pilots to view aerodrome. Two Corporals down with tummy-trouble. All already-erected aircraft ground-tested. Dinner—fish cutlet, with stewed fruit. Air Vice-Marshal Collier and Group-Captain Bird to lunch. Work on un-crating the seventh aircraft, and putting the final touches to the remaining six. After tea, main-planes fitted to No. 7 and work ceased at 7 o'clock, as men were wet through. A large party to supper, A.V.-M. Collier, G/C. Bird, General Grigorieff, Col. Eelegin (Naval Air Service), and Major Kuznetsov, Commandant of the Keg-Ustrov Aerodrome.

(Working hours, 9¾).

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Sixth day

Work began at 8 o'clock. All serviceable aircraft pushed out of hangar for test-flights. 11.30 a.m. F/Lt. Rook, P/O. Holmes and P/O. Woolaston arrived from liner to test aircraft. Arrangements made to warn the local garrison that British aircraft would be flying. Lunch consisting of Gooloopsi, potato-soup, and stewed Oornik. (British pilots, fresh off the transport, and tasting Russian food for the first time, had mixed opinions on the matter.) At 2.45 our first three Hurricanes took the air. After half-an-hour's flying, showing off their paces (necessarily restricted, as the cloud-base was 1,000 feet) they landed, and taxied to their dispersal pens. During tea a message came saying that the People's Commissar of the Fleet, an Admiral, accompanied by the Admiral of the Archangel Naval Force, with his Chief-of-Staff, were on the aerodrome and would like to see some Hurricanes flown. After tea, two Hurricanes took off and gave a show for the Admirals, who were impressed. After tea three further aircraft were taken out of their cases, with the help of some Russian soldiers, and taken into the hangar. Supper at 7 p.m.—for a change we served some English food, bully beef, tinned potatoes and pickles, which the men thoroughly enjoyed. After supper the three sets of wings were loosely attached to their fuselages. Work ceased at 11.45 p.m.

(Working hours of the day 12½.)

Seventh day

Work began at 8 a.m. on erecting the aircraft that had been brought into the hangar overnight. Oil and Petrol Engineers arrive from Moscow, and ask innumerable questions regarding oils and fuels. Air-testing of assembled aircraft goes on. Free issue of beer to airmen at supper tonight. Three more aircraft ready for ground-test tomorrow morning. First three aircraft now armed

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with six-hundred rounds per gun. Hostile aircraft reported in the area. . . .

* * * * *

The diary continues in the same strain. "Twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth aircraft were duly pushed into the hangar, and had their main-planes and tail-units fitted, were fuelled, and armed. . . ." More Russians and Russian Admirals come to see the show. The pilots arrive from the liner, test the aircraft, cautiously at first, and then have a grand low-flying beat-up of the Archangel area for good measure. An interim landing-ground is arranged at Afrikanda (heaven knows whence such a place, lying in the Arctic Circle, gets its name) to be a re-fuelling ground on the flight of the craft to Murmansk. The aircraft set off, and arrive. . . .

* * * * *

One or two points emerge from the severely technical diary. The working-hours of the party were, except on exceptional occasions, between eleven and twelve hours a day. Remembering the conditions—that airmen were billeted four miles off from their place of work, that they were working on a muddy and uneven aerodrome, with frequent rain, this is not a bad record. It is interesting to note that though the Russian food was good, rich, plentiful and frequent, the traditional fondness of the British airmen for bully beef and tinned potatoes survived. ("The airmen were much delighted that we had bully beef tonight.")

Fifteen aircraft were uncrated, jacked-up, lowered on to their undercarriages, their wings and tail-units were fitted and bolted home—and the finished aircraft were flown off the ground for a long cross-country trip, in nine days—the assembling having been done by a few hand-wound cranes, and a few spanners improvised by the Russians.

Those who know best the conditions prevailing at

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Keg-Ostrov aerodrome, Archangel, will agree that it was a good job well done. The "Erection Party" finally arrived at Murmansk-Vianga (after having seen all their charges off the ground) by Douglas aircraft.

CHAPTER VI

ACTION

Vianga
September

THROUGHOUT the Wing's stay in Russia a nightly signal was wirelessed to the Air Ministry by the Wing-Commander, giving briefly and in official language a résumé of the day's doings. The first operational patrols took place on September 11th :—Front line patrols were carried out by 81 and 134 Squadrons. "Nil combats—nil casualties"; and there followed a few technical details about the initial difficulties with engines and machine-guns pending the arrival of the Engineer-Officer's party, still at Archangel, and notes on the quality of the aviation spirit supplied.

The next day there was quite a good bit more to say, with six patrols and escorts flown :—

"Enemy bombers were sighted by the first patrol of three aircraft of 134 Squadron but they avoided combat. In the second patrol one Me.110 was attacked and damaged by two aircraft of 81 Squadron.

"Three aircraft of 134 Squadron gave escort cover to Soviet bombers in the third patrol, but there were no engagements. On the fourth patrol three aircraft of 134 Squadron gave cover to Soviet bombers but there were no engagements. Four Me.109's and one Henschel were intercepted by four aircraft of 81 Squadron in the

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fifth patrol. Two Me.109's were destroyed, one probably destroyed and the Henschel was damaged.

"In the sixth patrol five aircraft of 134 Squadron intercepted three enemy bombers which were attempting to attack Archangel, the enemy evaded combat and dropped bombs *ad lib* without causing damage. The four Me.109's escorting the bombers evaded combat.

"Casualties for day:—Own, 1 aircraft, Sgt. Pilot N. I. Smith killed. Enemy: 3* aircraft destroyed, one probable, one damaged."

The gist of the above signal is quoted because in the first place it is a record of the Wing's first day in full and intensive action; and because, in some respects, it is an epitome of the other days when flying was continuous and close action was frequent. It had been a day of good visibility, and favourable conditions generally. The Wing had carried out offensive patrols—i.e., patrols on the look-out for trouble and the intention of finding it. It had also carried out important escort-patrols with the job of protecting Soviet bombers—i.e., patrols whose *first* mission was to see the Allied craft safely up to their target and back, rather than to seek desultory combat as opportunity offered.

Our own aircraft had been guided towards combat by accurate Soviet anti-aircraft fire, as was to happen again in the future. Three enemy aircraft had been destroyed for certain, with one other a "probable," while another had been fired at and hit. The Wing had lost one of its own pilots—a casualty which, by the grace of luck—and good leadership on the part of squadron-commanders and flight-leaders—and the qualities of the fully-armed twelve-gun Hurricane—was not once to happen again during the Wing's stay on Soviet soil. On balance the Wing had certainly notified its presence to the enemy, the Germans across the line not so very far

* During the coding of the signal, the "probable" victory had been confirmed as "certain."

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distant; and certainly the conversation in German messes that night must have turned on the fact that "*einige Jagd-staffeln*" of British Hurricanes, squadron-number and wing-number unknown, had dropped in on their sector of the Front with a vengeance.

* * * * *

The next day's fighting of any importance took place very few days later, on September 17th. (There had been an interim of days with "*Nil patrols—weather inclement,*" or merely "*Six patrols flown—nil combats—nil casualities.*")

On the 17th there was more activity :—"*Three patrols. Aircraft 81 Squadron engaged enemy Me.109s. Three destroyed, one probable. Nil casualities.*" Next day corrected this under-statement : "*probable*" *of September 17th now* "*destroyed.*"

And that was that. After two days of full operational flying the score stood at seven-to-one in the Wing's favour, apart from any enemy aircraft "probably" destroyed, or damaged. Except for the loss of our one Hurricane and pilot, there had not been a single bullet-hole in any No. 151 Wing machine.

It was just at this time that two signals passed between the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Fleet and Air Service (under whose supreme command the Wing came) and the Chief of the British Air Staff. The signals were published in the London and Soviet Press, and were relayed to the Wing at Murmansk-Vianga.

Message from
AIR CHIEF MARSHAL SIR CHARLES PORTAL
Chief of the British Air Staff
to
ADMIRAL KUZNETSOV
Head of the Soviet Navy and Naval Air Service
on the occasion of
The First operations by No. 151 Wing, Royal Air Force
MURMANSK

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" British Air Squadrons have arrived in the U.S.S.R. and are now operating from Soviet territory against the common enemy. On this first and memorable occasion of our two Air Forces fighting side by side on Russian soil I send you the warmest congratulations of all ranks of the Royal Air Force on the skilful and heroic resistance maintained by the Soviet Air Forces against the German invaders.

" Permit me to express the confident hope that this may prove the beginning of ever wider and closer collaboration between our two Air Forces, each of which is already straining to the utmost to hasten the final defeat and collapse of the Nazi aggressors."

Reply from
ADMIRAL KUZNETSOV
Head of the Soviet Navy and Naval Air Service
to a message of greeting from
AIR CHIEF MARSHAL SIR CHARLES PORTAL
Chief of the British Air Staff
on the occasion of
The First operations by No. 151 Wing, Royal Air Force
MURMANSK

" Dear Air Chief Marshal,

I am happy to confirm receipt of your telegram on the occasion of the first R.A.F. operations at MURMANSK. These operations are the very real expression of the inflexible will of the two great freedom loving peoples who have mobilized their armed and economic might for a decisive and merciless fight against the German invaders.

I am sincerely happy at the fact that the lucky chance of beginning operations against the common enemy side by side with the R.A.F. on an important part of the Front has fallen to the Air Force of the Soviet Navy.

I take this opportunity of expressing to you, Air Chief

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Marshal of the British Royal Air Force, my sincere regards and respect.

N. KUZNETSOV,
Admiral,
September 1941. People's Commissar for the Navy."

It has been remarked before that wars are not won by "symbols" and "gestures"; but, as between Allies on the battlefield, symbols and gestures can help them along towards successful fulfilment.

The full text of the two signals was roneod and put up on all notice-boards about Vianga Camp. "*The first operations of No. 151 Wing in Russia. . . !*" The Wing in general, speaking of it as a unity and a personality (which by now it had become) felt that it was being handsomely treated by the world at large, and by the Higher Command, and went about its business in good humour.

CHAPTER VII

ROUTINE

September 11th onwards

A STEADY routine was now settled down to—or perhaps "comparatively steady routine" would be a more descriptive phrase; for in an operational camp, on foreign soil, in the autumn Arctic, making first contact with new Allies, so much was strange, unexpected, impromptu, and not-covered-by-any-known-procedure—that each day had the quality of being strikingly different from its predecessors in at least one or other important respect. Problems arose. Problems were settled. But at least, except towards the very end of the stay, nobody could complain of lack of variety.

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There will be inevitable questions asked :—What did the Wing eat ?—What were its quarters ?—What did its Camp look like ?—How did it communicate, if at all, with its Soviet opposite numbers—Was life a round of gaiety, or the bleakness of desolation ?—Was the Russian mode of Air-Force life more like our own, or less like our own ? How, in short, did Anglo-Soviet collaboration proceed in the northern solitudes ?

Extracts from various Wing day-to-day journals may give a hint of it. If one factor alone survives—that contact with our Ally was intimate, constant, generous on their side, and fruitful in results achieved and for future results to come, then the main point will have emerged clear.

September 12th

First fully operational day, as recounted already. Our score : three certain, one probable, one damaged. Loss :—one pilot killed. Many alerts ; several Huns over the Camp. No bombs dropped.

September 14th

Dull day. Hardly any flying. Funeral of Sergt.-Pilot in " Cemetery of Soviet Heroes," on high ground overlooking Murmansk Sound. We sent a firing-party ; the Russians sent a firing-party. The Russians had also, unasked, made and dyed the British White Ensign, and the coffin was carried through the village and up to the grave with the British Ensign and the flag of the Soviet Fleet Air-Arm draped side by side over it. The English Funeral Service was read by F/Lt. Fisher. A quiet and curiously impressive ceremony of the first British casualty on Soviet soil.

September 14th

" Two patrols—nil engagements, nil casualities." Another funeral—this time of a Russian air-ace and a

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Soviet Sergt.-Pilot. The Wing sent a firing-party, and our Commanding-Officer and some of his officers attended. The local brass-band turned out and played Chopin's Funeral March. The occasion was made a political one, with speeches at the grave-side, lasting from 5 o'clock till long after dark, a matter of nearly three hours. Impressive—in a different way.

Back in the Mess. F/Lt. Michael Rook (cousin to S/Ldr. Rook) had been testing his Hurricane. Asked if he had made a good landing :—" Perfect, old boy ! Put her down as light as a gnat's whisker ! . . ." Seeing that a twelve-gun Hurricane weighs nearly four and a half tons, the phrase had great verbal charm, if some exaggeration.

Dozens of fresh eggs have appeared in the Mess, served, fried, in plates of three. Michael Rook eats three, then is pressed by the Russian waitresses to take another plate of three, and complies. Then is pressed to take another three, but declines :—" I can eat a Flight, but not a Squadron. . . ."

September 17th

Second full day's flying. Four certain victories ; no loss. Score now seven to one. See " Northern Lights " in the sky at night—like bent searchlights—continually shifting their beams.

September 18th

The Camp continues to develop. This is roughly its layout. It is nothing whatever like the typical English R.A.F. Station with concrete runways, miles of straight, wide concrete roadways, brick hangars half the size of Olympia, and so forth. The Russian camp seems, in comparison, to have grown up of its own accord, scattered, haphazard, and almost entirely unconnected by formal roads. Its site is a sandy plateau surrounded by low hills a couple of miles inland from the Murmansk

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Sound. The plateau itself is covered with a silver-birch plantation. The trees for the most part have been left standing—which adds still further to the impression of casualness in lay-out—to go from the Headquarters building to the airmen's barrack-blocks or to the Mess, one walks nearly half a mile through the birch-plantation and finds each of the other buildings set up in its own clearing. The general effect is pretty enough when there is a dash of sunlight on the scene, and is admirable from the point of view of dispersal and camouflage. There are no hangars on the aerodrome, each aircraft has its own wooden-built bay, screened by a few branches. The effect of all this is that no one single bomb could do very much collective damage—the whole set-up is so scattered that the personnel of the camp are never in one place together at any one time. The disadvantage of the scattered camp is the strain that it puts on the transport. Aircrews and ground-crews have to be conveyed large distances back and forth to meals, sometimes several times a day. Except for one single metalled road running a mile into the camp, the rest of the roads are of a quality almost unknown outside Russia—mere paths and tracks among the trees, by now, owing to the autumn rain and the passing of heavy transport, knocked into axle-deep mud-holes. The transport has got a rough time ahead of it.

The main "Officers' Building" is a large, gaunt, two-storeyed, red-brick affair, half barrack, half country-house, nick-named by the Wing, for no discoverable reason, the "Kremlin." Its ground-floor is used as Wing H.Q., orderly-rooms, sick-quarters, and stores. The upper rooms, all opening off the same long, echoing, uncarpeted corridor, are used as officers' sleeping-quarters (three or four to each large room), an ante-room, and a bar. The whole building is double-windowed and central-heated—that is to say, snug and warm except when the central-heating takes into its head, as

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it does occasionally, to go off duty for a few hours. On the whole, as officers-quarters go, they are bare and unluxurious compared with the best type of R.A.F. station in England ; but clean and habitable, far better than an English hutted camp, and far better than we had reasonable cause to expect. The disadvantages are two : —no running water or fixed baths or basins anywhere (therefore officers use canvas camp-kit and don't do much washing but patronize instead the local village-baths—of which more anon) ; second, the uncarpeted corridor positively multiplies and amplifies all sounds made in it. —the cough of a fly at the other end of the building becomes like the banging of a door. Hence any larking about or singing late in the evening by one roomful of young pilots can keep half the officers of the Wing awake. Hence, larking about and singing after a certain hour in the evening have to be severely rationed. Beds, blankets, and linen sheets (spotless) are provided by the Russians.

Officers and airmen's dining-halls are a third of a mile away through the plantation. The staff is Russian and the messing is Russian—on the whole good, rich (rather over-greasy, until suggestion got this altered) and plentiful. The menu varies as to how much, and of what quality, stock is available. On the first day of all, before the Wing-Commander arrived on the scene, our hosts evidently wanted to open in a splash of hospitality, and three hundred airmen were provided with a breakfast that included steaks, champagne, and glasses of brandy. (This procedure was immediately stopped by the Wing-Commander on his arrival.) Typical meals have now settled down to :—breakfast, meat of some sort often in the form of rissoles (the revival of the "Archangel cutlet"), white bread, butter (excellent in quality and unlimited in quantity) and jam ; midday dinner—hors d'œuvres consisting almost monotonously of smoked salmon (again of excellent quality and un-

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limited in quantity), caviar (usually the black, pressed sort) and very good cold ham; soup—the traditional "Borshtsh" or "Tschee"—good vegetable soups such as one gets in any French farm-house; then a meat course, with the meat usually very tough—but by this time diners have usually got enough inside them not to suffer from starvation even if the meat course is neglected; and as sweet, that is usually known as "*compot*," preserved fruit of some sort, served in a glass with syrup. Supper is much the same, with or without the meat-course. Odd things occasionally make their appearance—omelettes, dull and pancakey when made with egg-powder, delicious when made with real eggs; goose (frequently); fried steaks (the young pilot-officer's real delight) from time to time. Tea—Russian-fashion, in a glass, is served with all meals. No drinking of alcohol of any sort is allowed in the camp until the evening meal, this by the Wing-Commander's orders. At the evening-meal the Russians provide the officers' mess (free) with large decanters of a Port-like wine which is simply called "Vino"—very drinkable.

There are two reactions to this type of messing, and the reactions are conflicting. In general the slightly older officers, who have mostly travelled much abroad, and are therefore used to accepting the "dishes of the country," appreciate the smoked salmon and the caviar and the soups, and approve of the diet. Several very young officers, however, who have lived most of their short adult lives in R.A.F. messes, and whose ideas of dietetic bliss are limited by eggs-and-bacon and grilled steaks, and grilled steaks and eggs-and-bacon, have an almost pathological horror of the strange and unaccustomed, and have been heard to remark on taking their seats at table, "Hell, here's that . . . smoked salmon again." On the whole, though, there is not the slightest sign of any member of the Wing losing weight; and it is obvious that, in view of all the local conditions, the

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Russians, both in high quarters and the local staff, are doing their very best for us—they are, in a word, treating us as honoured guests.

This was made evident by a slight passage-of-arms the other day. The problem involved was the airmen's messing-accommodation. (As regards the food, they are given almost identically the same as the officers.) The airmen mess in a dining-hall capable of holding only just more than a hundred people at a sitting, and as there are more than five hundred of them, meals have to be arranged in five sittings—breakfasts taking place, for example, at 7, 7.30, 8, 8.30 and 9 o'clock. This involves a terrific strain on the Russian staff, who have done their best to live up to it and to keep punctual. To lighten their labours, and save them washing up endless utensils between the sittings, it was suggested by the Wing authorities that airmen should bring to the table their own knives, forks, spoons, and mugs—as is done on every R.A.F. station in England—and should take them away and wash them themselves. The manageress of the Russian staff flatly refused to recognize this order for several days. When finally challenged on the subject, she gave as her reason that it was not " the thing " that guests should bring their own knives and forks to the table. . . . The argument was misguided—for it failed to allow for the fact that the operational flying-programme must at all costs be kept to—but it at least indicated an extreme of zeal, co-operative willingness and hospitality.

The airmen's living-quarters are two-storeyed, red-brick barrack-blocks, also double-windowed, electric-lighted, and with wood-burning stoves in each room. They are rather overcrowded—five to eight airmen according to the size of the room—but not unbearably so. They are exactly as comfortable as the airmen choose to make them—that is to say, if the kits are stacked tidily, and windows are opened during the daytime, they can be kept clean and clean-looking. (The airmen also are

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given by the Russian clean sheets once a week.) When the airmen are slack, get up in the morning leaving the black-out undrawn, turn on the electric light, and try to keep the embers of last night's fire going, the quarters look (and smell) like a slum. There are strenuous Wing-orders about opening the windows.

The barrack-blocks, recently evacuated by Russian military in our favour, are scrupulously clean, except for a couple of rooms that have been fumigated. Less so certain older wooden-built out-buildings, just outside the boundaries of the camp, that the Wing has had to take over as Sergeants' Mess, airmen's recreation-room, and store-houses. There have been countless nondescript Russian workmen living in them, building the camp, and strong counter-measures have to be taken to anti-bug them. (Old wooden-built buildings are notoriously a problem.)

All things considered, the camp might be very much worse than it is. The airmen had been carefully prepared on the voyage for what they might have to expect—Nissen huts in a mud-swamp—so on the whole they are much relieved.

Isolation and lack of Communication

The wooden-built village of Vianga is about seventeen miles from Murmansk (which is 170 miles within the Arctic Circle). The Camp itself is about a mile and a half from the wooden-built village of Vianga. Vianga village consists of some brick-built barracks for troops, a couple of hundred wooden-built dwelling-houses, a bath-house, and a large wooden-built cinema, capable of holding four or five hundred people, with club-rooms leading off it. There is reputed to be one shop in the place, though as most airmen questioned on the point appear to be very doubtful about it, the emporium cannot be a large one. Airmen and officers can go twice a week (Wednesdays and Saturdays) to see pictures—sometimes

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Russian, sometimes old American. This finishes the social life of Vianga. No airman or officer has yet been as far as the local metropolis, Murmansk itself, for a variety of pressing reasons—the amount of work to be done in Camp, shortage of transport for the seventeen-mile drive, lack of Russian passes—which, in this technically "front-line" part of the world, need photographs and signatures and a long-delayed process of registration.

"Front-line" regulations govern everything here—for the enemy are not so very far away, and the loosely-held line may be in continual process of changing. Everybody in the district, civilians and women included, are in direct military employ—that is to say, that the waitresses who wait on us, the civilian pioneer-corps who are digging the trenches and building the roads about the camp, are all part of the army organization. There are Russian sentries on the gates of the camp, with rifles and bayonets, and a Russian sentry, with rifle and bayonet, on guard at the door of our own Kremlin (he also answers the telephone when Russian calls come through). All British officers are required to wear revolvers even when walking about within the camp. This is partly in case of emergency, partly as a sort of badge-of-office—if anybody in an officer's uniform is seen to be without a revolver he is automatically taken to be an enemy prisoner escaping—and Russian sentries are said to be remarkably quick-on-the-trigger in such suspected cases.

The Russian bomber-crews and ground-crews who are flying off the same aerodrome have their own accommodation in a camp some distance from our own. Russian technical officers—colonels, majors, captains, and their interpreters, however, continually drop into meals in our Mess. Some of them have a few words of English. All of them are good-tempered. It is remarkable that the technical officers of both nationalities seem to have discovered a means of communication without actually knowing a word in common—our Wireless and Engineer

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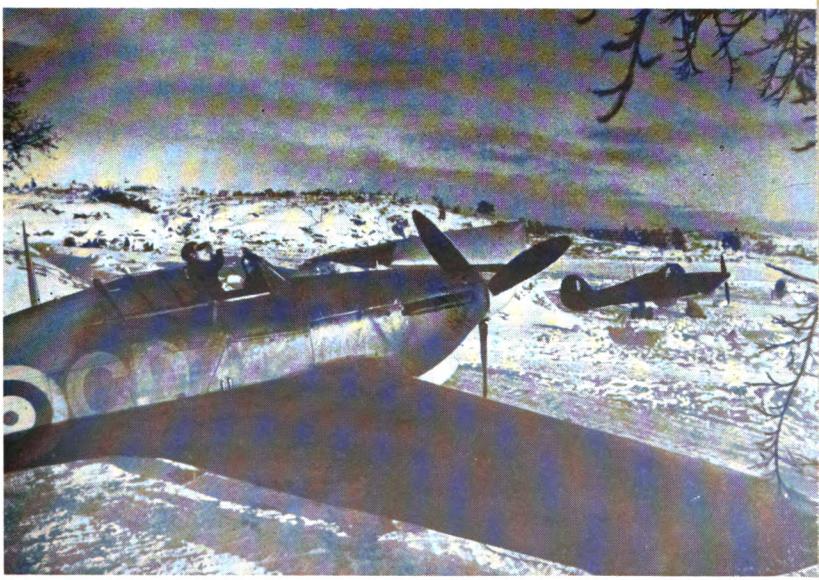

(*Above*) Russian soldiers excavating dispersal bays for the aircraft
(*Below*) Fighter Pilots at the aerodrome " at the immediate readiness "

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(*Above*) A Russian sledge on the aerodrome
(*Below*) Inspection after a raid

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officers, " Meester Feesher " and " Meester Gittins," seem to be able to explain the most abstruse points of wireless and engineering to their opposite numbers with complete mutual comprehension. After all, it is not inconceivable. People who understand the same thing understand one another. It is possible that a couple of painters, of different nationalities, could stand in front of the same masterpiece and explain to one another, by mystic means, what each of them felt about it.

The question of relative ranks presents a minor problem. The Russian ranks are comparatively simple : " *Genêrâl-Maior* " ; " *Polkovnik* " (for Colonel), " *Maior,*" and " *Kapitan.*" The English " Squadron-Leader " and " Flight Lieutenant " are apparently found most foxing by the Russians. In all politeness, they have fallen back instead on the universal " Meester."

CHAPTER VIII

DIARY

September 19th onwards

September 19th

Dud day. " *One patrol—nil combats, nil casualties.*"

September 20th

Dud day. " *Two patrols—nil combats, nil casualties.*" Wing airmen getting air-raid shelter trenches dug about the camp ; fire-fighting squad organized. A party in the officer's Club-house at Vianga by the neighbouring Russian squadron, to celebrate their Squadron receiving the Order of the Red Banner. Invited as guests :—Our C.O., the two squadron-leaders, our own two officer-interpreters, and Group-Captain Bird, up with us from the Embassy Staff in Moscow.

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September 21st (Sunday)

Very dud day again. No flying at all. It seems to have been quite a bit of a party last night, with a concert, *two* suppers (one before the concert, and one at half-time), dancing, and endless mixed drinking. The Russians have been at their tricks again, trying to deceive their innocent guests as to the alcoholic potency of vodka. The C.O.—usually the world's early riser—does not appear at breakfast, neither do the two squadron-leaders. (They have all no doubt woken, cocked their eye at the weather—the pilot's first instinct on waking—and decided that as it is impossible operationally, they might as well lie in.) Other members were still counted unserviceable after lunch. (It may be remarked that these periodic parties seem to be endemic rather than epidemic—that is to say, that when there is due cause for one, a party is organized, and conviviality has a free hand. But they are not frequent. They are usually taken in periods of bad weather, with flying impossible. On normal days the routine of all squadrons is so rigid as to be almost teetotal.)

Russian baths in the village for most of the Wing officers, particularly those who have been guests at the party the night before. These baths are becoming an institution with the Wing. They are a normal feature of village life, and have not been built especially for us. They have been made free to our airmen on four afternoons a week, and to our officers on two evenings a week. They occur in a brick-built bathing-house. The establishment is clean and well run. One goes in and takes off all one's clothes (and revolver) and deposits them in a locker-room. One then passes to another room, the shower-bath room. Freezing-cold and scalding-hot water gushes down from sprays, and one soaps and washes oneself. Then the steam-room, where they turn on the heat at full pressure. One sits there dripping with perspiration for anything up to half-an-hour, then returns to the hot and cold shower-baths; then, if one wants,

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returns to the steam-room, before finally cooling-off and dressing again. The sensation experienced is of being extraordinarily refreshed, in an ecstasy of cleanliness—several pounds lighter and feeling, if not looking, ten years younger.

The attendants at the baths are women, middle-aged, almost like Esquimaux in their flat-nosed, high-cheek-boned countenances. Long habit has made then absolutely indifferent to wandering about in a roomful of naked men. Not so, apparently, some of our own airmen. One of our Corporals, a tall, lanky, diffident youth, was so embarrassed that he turned away when one of the women came through the other afternoon. The woman, amused at his embarrassment, smacked him smartly on the behind as she went past him, and went away roaring with laughter. "*Autres pays, autres mœurs*" seems to be the right comment on the matter.

The Russians keep strange hours. The Russian General commanding the district, a Russian Fleet Air-Arm man, who is the immediate superior officer responsible for the Wing, has taken to sending for our own C.O. for operational conferences at ten o'clock at night onwards. The other night he (Gen. Kuznetsov) happened to be in the middle of a steam-bath—so our own Winko went and had a steam-bath with him and a conference at the same time.

September 22nd

Snow—the first snow, though certainly not the last—and quite a lot of it. The Russian General is supposed to be coming to make his first flight in a Hurricane this afternoon—but the weather is impossible, and he will probably have to postpone it.

September 23rd

Snow again, and plenty of it. There are bright intervals, when the sunlight looks extraordinarily beauti-

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ful falling on the snow-covered surrounding hills and on the yellow-and-green leaves of the silver-birches in our own plantation. But most of the time the sky is grey, and heavy with more snow-clouds. The sandy surface of the 'drome itself is terribly bumpy, and full of puddles as large as small lakes. The typical autumn weather of the district—snow, mud, and rain in equal proportions—is upon us. Good flying-days will probably be numbered—experts say as an outside estimate half-a-dozen to a dozen a month.

September 24th

A fine morning; then more snow, followed by rain, sleet, and general filth. One patrol flown, an escort to Russian bombers. These apparently both climbed and flew at a rate that astonished our boys considerably. The Hurricanes found that in an operation that lasted as long as an hour they had to go all-out to keep station with them. (The Russian type is known as P.2.) The Russians expressed themselves very pleased with the Wing's escort.

September 25th

A really filthy morning, light snow, heavy rain turning to sleet, driven crooked by a lot of wind. The camp with its puddles, mud-roads, and leaves shedding down from the trees, looks desolate beyond belief. No operational flying of any sort. The Russian General takes off in his Hurricane successfully. He has been down to the aerodrome several days in succession to get instruction. He has a girl-interpretress (an ex-schoolmistress) who has written down all the cockpit-drill, and gives him examinations in it exactly as if he were a school-pupil. When he was fully satisfied that he knew what was what, he took off successfully and made a couple of beautiful landings. He is a very experienced pilot, with thousands of flying-hours to his credit. He is a spare-built man,

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with close, greying hair—but only about thirty-eightish. Now henceforward, all the Russians will be wanting to fly the Hurricanes. The O.T.U. (Operational Training Unit)—which is what in effect the Wing will become, can now get going.

September 26th

Cloudy and dull, getting a little better towards mid-afternoon. No flying in the morning.

For the afternoon there is an operation impending—81 Squadron to escort Soviet bombers in a raid in the Petsamo district in the afternoon. A magnificent sight at the take-off. First, "A" Flight, 81; then Soviet fast dive-bombers; then "B" Flight; then a flight of Soviet heavy bombers. The sky above the vast sandy aerodrome becomes full of aircraft taking station.

They are all back in just over an hour, after a brilliant action on the part of "B" Flight—perhaps the best thing that the Wing has done out here yet. "B" Flight was properly "jumped" by 6 Me. 109's—as is always liable to happen to a flight when doing escort-duty with a lot of cloud about. When it happens, the flight that has been jumped is usually doing pretty well if it gets away without loss to itself or its charges. "B" Flight, however, did better than this—they turned into the Me's, more or less each to each, getting in bursts as and when opportunity offered after the first evasion of the "jump"; shot three of them down—all confirmed later as "certain"; and got back to the aerodrome without a single bullet-hole in any of our own machines. By this action the Soviet bombers did their work unmolested. Telephone-message of thanks from the Russian General.

September 27th

Short return of good flying-weather; clouds few and high. Another bomber-escort flown this morning, No. 81 Squadron again coming in for it. Another fight. Another

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two Huns, one certain, the second confirmed by lunch-time.

An accident on the aerodrome, two airmen killed, and one pilot (F/Lt. Berg) seriously injured in a taking-off crash during a scramble to get every available machine into the air when some Huns were overhead photographing the aerodrome. The surface of the aerodrome is notoriously bad, especially just outside the dispersal bays where the aircraft are kept at readiness. It is customary for two airmen to hang on to the tail of each aircraft to steady it while the pilot is taxying it through the preliminary puddles. The accident occurred either through their not getting his signal to get clear, or through the pilot, imagining that they were already away, not giving the signal. In both cases it was combative zeal to get the craft as quickly off the ground as possible, and into action—but, nevertheless, tragically regrettable. (The first and last incident of its kind during the Wing's stay.)

The Finns claim over the wireless that they have captured Kandalaksha. (A glance at the map will show that if this claim is true it completely cuts off the Wing from all rail-born sources of supply from Archangel.)

September 28th (Sunday)

Good flying-weather. Kandalaksha claim denied by Russians in the morning ; re-announced (as rumour only) by British wireless at lunch-time.

Four patrols flown, escorting Russian bombers. Nil combats, nil casualties.

First issue of ration-rum to airmen of the Wing in the evening—the weather is suddenly getting much colder, and the Wing-Commander in consultation with his senior Medical Officer thought that it would be a good move. But it involved as much work as a large-scale Movement-Order on the part of the Wing staff. For days past my note-book has been jotted with notes about

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drawing the rum, diluting the rum, getting exact noggins made to measure out the regulation ½-gills of rum, neither more or less, detailing sergeants to supervise the dishing out of the rum, etc., etc.. (The paramount aim of all this supervision is, of course, that no airman shall, by doing a deal with another airman who "don't drink the stuff," be able to get two tots per evening, or alternatively drink his tot neat. Ration rum is extremely powerful and comforting. The Navy have a traditional method of diluting it and dishing it out. We have to improvise our own arrangements.) However, all goes off successfully — none of the five hundred airmen tight—which would have brought the Camp under a charge of rowdiness, and the rum-issue itself into disrepute.

An interesting Orderly-Room colloquy this morning :— The C.O. had up in front of him a little assistant-carpenter (an ex-Air-Gunner in Whitleys) who had drifted off, with no official sanction, and done an operational-raid over the Lines as air-gunner in a Russian bomber. (How he had got the trip was a story in itself. He had been before the war in the Merchant Service, and had then made contacts at Archangel—which contacts he had immediately renewed as soon as the Wing landed. From these he had obtained introductions to the Russian squadrons at Vianga. Anyhow, he had got the trip, strictly, of course, contrary to all English disciplinary orders.) How would the C.O. treat this strange offence—one of the few offences quite unbudgeted for in King's Regulations? His discourse in the Orderly-Room was sharp and to the point. He said, in his clipped New Zealand utterance :—"Personally, I admire your spirit. Personally, I think it a bloody good show. But all the same, if you *had* got shot down you'd have put me in the soup, see? Now get out!" Exit little Corporal Flockhart. At least, no one can accuse Camp life here of lacking variety. . . .

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September 29th

Dud day. No. 134 do some flying as bomber-escort.

It was about this time that there occurred an amusing demonstration of Soviet bomber-flying, that was only told me later by one of our pilots. He said :—" The other day we were coming back off bomber-escort, and as we headed for home, after the Soviet bomber-boys had done their stuff, we thought for fun that we'd show them some of our formation-flying. Their bombers were flying back in fairly wide formation, so a couple of our Hurricanes closed in on each of them, and began flying back absolutely wing-tip to wing-tip with them. The Soviet pilots saw that something was up, so they thought that they'd show us a bit of *their* formation-flying ! So all their bombers closed in on one another—and there were the whole lot of us, tucked in tight together, in the sort of wizard formation-flying you used to get in the old Hendon Pageant days—with their rear-gunners leaning out of their turrets, and holding up their thumbs at us, and grinning."

It is a pleasant picture, almost idyllic in its craziness, of the two Nations coming back, at peace and in gaiety and mutual understanding, from one phase of the conflict. . . .

September 30th

No flying. Signal of congratulation from Sir Archibald Sinclair to the Wing ; also from Air Vice-Marshal in Moscow. From Sir Archibald :—" The destruction by your squadrons of 12 German aircraft for the loss of only one of your own is a brilliant achievement ; it is a source of particular pleasure and satisfaction to us here that you are working so closely and so successfully with the Russian Air Force. Good luck to you, 151 Wing."

Wing " Daily Routine Orders " re-publish the signal—but then Daily Routine Orders have to publish everything that concerns the life of the Camp. In the same

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(*Above*) Hot meals for the Pilots
(*Below*) A game of draughts with the Russians

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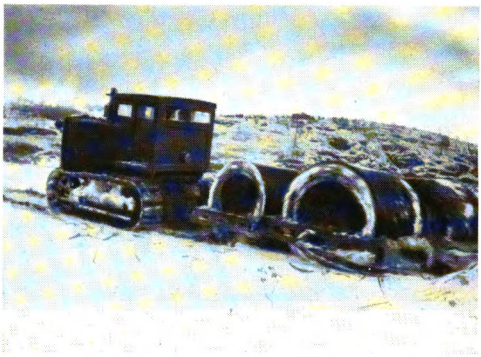
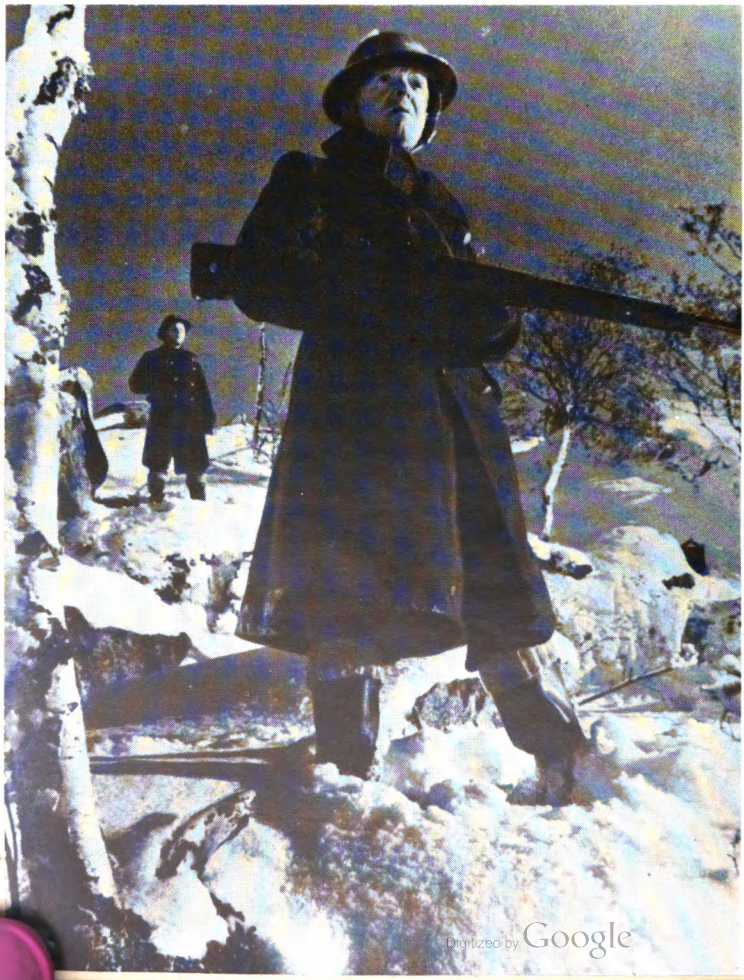


(*Above*) Tractor-drawn rollers to keep the landing ground in condition

(*Below*) On Guard



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daily issue there is a threat against an unknown airman who has committed a public nuisance on the landing of one of the barrack-blocks, and the promise that if he is caught doing it again " severe disciplinary action will be taken."

End of the first month's work.

CHAPTER IX

DIARY

October

October 1st

HEAVY, overcast sky. *Local practice flying. Nil casualties.* Signal sent to Air Vice-Marshal Collier and the Mission in Moscow, who had sent the Wing congratulations :— " *Thanks for good wishes—hope there are more in the bag before we go home—Isherwood.*"

October 2nd

Dud again. Little flying.

October 3rd

Heavy rain. Today's surprise-effort in the Camp (it has been remarked that no two days here are ever alike) —a message comes through late in the afternoon from the Russians that the camp water-supply, which we had been told would be cut off till " five o'clock this afternoon," is in point of fact to be cut off " till this time five days hence. . . ." The Russians are burying their water-mains deep in the ground against the approach of frost. Mild alarm, and immediate action necessary. Orders have hastily to be got out rationing the remaining water stored, which will amount to about a pint per day per airman ; meanwhile the batmen are put to catch the rain-water in buckets and barrels as it pours down off the

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Kremlin roof. A return to primitive life with a vengeance!—but on the whole rather fun. By way of contrast—one of the everlasting contrasts that make life here so fascinating—champagne and pancakes for supper.

October 4th

Grey, lowering sky, heavy with clouds. Rain early in the morning, turning to light snow about 11, then stopping. Rain and snow again by midday. As for genuine good weather, it looks as though "we'd had it." No flying.

The muddle about the mail arrangements is beginning to rouse discontent among the airmen—and with some justification. No single item either of official or personal mail has reached us yet. Seeing that the Wing was reporting at Peake Moor in the last days of July, and that letters from loving relatives presumably began to be posted from that time onwards, this now leaves a gap of more than nine weeks. It is not as though Russia were an isolated country, or as distant as some point in the Far East. Airmen have seen it announced in the *Moscow Daily News*—our only newspaper to hand—that long since our arrival in Russia streams of convoys, flying-boats, Lord Beaverbrook's party, delegates to various missions in Moscow, etc., have been entering—and it is felt that some or all of these might have brought with them a few bags of mail. Matters have not been improved by a signal from Air Ministry in response to the C.O.'s enquiry:—"Mail will be despatched in convoy loading in England now. . . ." The "*will be*" is interesting—it is at least a tacit admission that nothing whatever has been done up to now. Some authority in the G.P.O. has just simply forgotten about us.

News comes in through the Wing-Commander at supper tonight that the usual Soviet Air Force tariff of 1,000 roubles per enemy aircraft destroyed is to be paid by the Soviet authorities to each of our pilots who has a con-

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firmed victory to his credit—12,000 roubles in all by now (about £240 at the rates of exchange fixed for us). The Wing-Commander asks what to do with the money. Amused cries from the pilots, " We can't take it ! Why, it would spoil our amateur status ! " Ultimately, it is agreed that the money shall be collected in bulk by the Wing and transferred to the R.A.F. Benevolent Fund in London.

October 5th (Sunday)

Party of twenty or so officers to Murmansk in the evening in transport provided by Russians. The occasion, small in its way, makes a break in Camp routine—the first since we have been here. It is amusing to have batmen laying-out best uniforms and polishing buttons. (Hitherto, in this roughest of rough camps, everyone has been going about in battle-dress, gum-boots, flying-boots, mackintoshes, Irvine-jackets, fur caps bought off the Russians . . . anything and everything that keeps one warm and dry ; with a result that the Wing in general has looked like a collection of tramps.)

The evening is exactly characteristic of what might have been expected : a long drive over bad roads in the dusk and snow ; Murmansk, twenty-five years ago a few huts in a wilderness, is now a large, straggling, mostly wooden-built town, with some high blocks of brick-built flats. Roads and pavements primitive. But it has a large and well-built " *Dom Kultura* " (" House of Culture "), with a wide flight of stone steps leading up to it, and a paved terrace with bronze statuary in front of it—obviously the centre of life of the place. The building houses within itself a large theatre holding about a thousand, a small cinema holding about three hundred, a large sort of foyer-place with a beautifully-laid parquet-floor and grand-piano and a radio (general dancing takes place in the intervals of the entertainment), various club-rooms and a library. The theatre is clean and kempt,

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its interior lined with polished woods, and the corridors, cloak-rooms and foyers are swept and garnished—but the lavatories (doubtless owing to the freezing of pipes in the present stage of the weather) are in a condition that defies description. If only the Russians took the same care over sanitation as they do about most other things—instead of leaving it till the last item on the programme. . . .

In Murmansk we came across Russian civilians for the first time—even if a particularly war-like type of Russian civilian. Murmansk, owing to its short distance behind the Line, ranks as a " front line " town. Thousands of its normal citizens have been evacuated. Those that remain are almost without exception ordnance-clerks, pioneer-corps, members of Army constructional companies—something or other to do with the Armed Forces. At least half the women are in uniform—wearing boots, khaki tunics, khaki shirts or breeches, with a very workmanlike revolver slung round the waist. They are perfectly willing to be danced with in the intervals of the play on this festive Sunday evening. But Murmansk is eminently a " garrison town " for all that.

October 6th

Enemy bomb-raid on our aerodrome in middle of afternoon. High clouds, and good visibility for a change ; some A.A. goes off, some bombs bang down, and the camp air-raid alarm sounds, all pretty well simultaneously. Wing-Headquarters, by now well accustomed to this routine, dives for its slit-trenches outside the Kremlin as another considerably big bang is heard, and from its trenches watch for the next quarter-of-an-hour the sky rapidly fill with more Russian A.A. and climbing Hurricanes. It is a marvellous show, though most of the best of it turns out to have happened in the sky out of sight of the camp. Reports come back to Headquarters by telephone from time to time as to what have been our

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casualties and what the results of the fights. Casualties, considering the size of the raid, have been almost comically slight. Bombs have dropped on the aerodrome, one of our poor overworked lorries has been knocked about—wind-screen bashed in, tyre punctured; one flight-mechanic has got a chip out of his shin, and is being taken to hospital to be X-rayed, another flight-mechanic has either been knocked over on his head, or had a clod of earth hit him on the head, and his head is lightly abraised. Our overworked Engineer-Officer has likewise been blown clean across his own repair workshop, but is otherwise unscathed. Our pilots have either been off the ground, or in some cases have taken off the ground, in time to intercept and contact. Three enemy aircraft have been shot down for certain, already confirmed (two Ju. 88 and one Me. 109); three Ju's 88 are counted as "probables," with six Ju "damaged." All our pilots and machines returned safely, one machine with a piece of cannon-shell in it, another with a couple of bullet-holes. Our only further casualty was a pilot, Scotty Edmiston, who had a bomb burst in front of his machine, stopping his engine, when in the act of taking off; he climbed out on to the wing of the machine—and was then promptly blown by the blast of another bomb off the wing flat into a mud-puddle. He is otherwise quite uninjured.

Michael Rook, in the course of the interception-manœuvres, had the experience of getting detached from his own squadron (No. 81), and formating idly round the sky with the six Me. 109's, whom he took absent-mindedly to be Hurricanes of 134 Squadron. He apparently flew with them happily for quite some time—even waggling his wings as a sign of greeting and friendship—until he suddenly woke to his mistake, gave the nearest Me. (who was by now coming straight at him) a squirt with his twelve guns, and blew it completely to pieces. As he said afterwards, "The Germans must have thought me either bloody brave or bloody foolish."

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The raiding force turns out to have been 14 enemy bombers and 6 fighters.

(It is the habit of pilot's stories of combats to come out bit by bit. As a matter of fact, Rook's job was not quite so simple as this, according to later investigation. He had the remaining five of the Me's on his tail for many minutes after he had got in his squirt, and they chased him down to mast-level over a Destroyer lying in Murmansk Sound before he finally got away, after one of the stiffest combats in his life. As he remarked even later, " when I finally got back to the aerodrome and landed, I sat actually sweating in the cock-pit for some time before I could climb out." It is an accepted fact that even the most brilliant of fighter-pilot victories are a combination of luck as well as brilliance. On the whole, Micky Rook, the eater of a Flight of eggs as well as the consort of a flight of Me. 109's, is rather lucky to be alive.)

The afternoon's show seems generally to have been an extremely good one ; the most pleasing feature of all being that No. 134 Squadron at last broke their run of bad luck. No. 81 Squadron have had *all* the luck consistently for the first month of flying, and the entire score of twelve confirmed victories stood up to now to their credit. No. 134, doing an identical number of front-line patrols and bomber-escorts, and endless boring " periods of readiness " on the rim of the frozen aerodrome, have not seen an enemy within the possibility of contacting. Today their luck turned and they had their full share of the action and of the success. They are extremely pleased about it, as is the whole Camp.

October 7th

Weather dud and semi-dud. *One patrol.* Signals are beginning to come in from Air Ministry and from British Air Mission, Moscow, arranging for the ultimate break-up of the Wing :—" *On your return such-and-such of your*

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transport vehicles, such-and-such stores, equipment, rations . . . will be handed over to Air Mission, Moscow; such-and-such retained by the Russians. . . ." "*State how soon and how many Russian pilots will be well enough trained to take over flying Hurricanes, and how many Russian ground-staff will be competent to service them. . . .*" The "classes" have been continuous. The first Russian-flown Hurricane attacked its first victim over the sea the other day.

October 8th

Four patrols, escorting Soviet bombers. Signal from Air Mission, Moscow :—"*You will probably receive instructions shortly to begin movement on October 25th, leaving behind small maintenance-parties. . . .*" "*Heartiest congratulations on operations.*"

But "movement" is a very generalized term. In which direction is the proposed movement to take place?

October 9th

Weather non-operational. Snow thick and heavy, and freezing hard.

October 10th

Weather non-operational. Russian pilots go on flying our Hurricanes in practice flights.

October 11th

Weather still inclement; aerodrome surface unserviceable through snow-drifts. Nil patrols. The snow is now the genuine article—thick, deep, crisp to the point of crackling under one's boots, and quite dry. In moments of bright sunlight, the clear air here in the North, the absence of soot, factory-smoke, etc., the snow takes on a brilliant, incandescent whiteness that is unearthly. The temperature is 10–15 degrees Fahrenheit below freezing. The last leaves are off the trees in the silver-birch grove. One can now see the gaunt barrack-blocks of the airmen from the Wing H.Q. building nearly half a mile away—impossible up to a few days ago. Horse-drawn sleighs make their appearance on the roads

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as the normal form of civilian transport. Russian winter has set in.

There has been hardly any flying (except training-flying) for days. The boys down at dispersal-points on the aerodrome are going in for Ski-ing, tobogganning, and a new form of sport, invented by themselves, consisting of being hauled at speed on a sleigh across the aerodrome a rope's-length behind a motor-transport. (The only snag about the newly-devised sport is that when the car takes a sudden turn, the sleigh and its occupants, a rope's-length behind, are liable to be hurled through the air for considerable distances. One of the pilots, a sergeant, has broken open his head in the process. In consequence, the sport has had to be severely rationed as to speed and ballistics.)

October 12th

"B" Flight, 81 Squadron, due to hand over their aircraft to the Russians today, and to become non-operational, as have certain Flights in the Wing already. The more the Wing completes its originally-intended function—that of giving the Russian pilots and ground-staffs experience in manipulating Hurricanes, the less work it will have to do—and the more rowdy and difficult to manage will its personnel become.

There is a signal in tonight that our next job may be to push off to the Middle East. This is a new one on us—and a totally unexpected one. The Wing was confidently counting on moving when its combined job of instruction and demonstration was done—but on moving homeward, not several thousands of miles farther from home. . . .

October 14th

Signals continue to arrive hinting at the unspecified move "*south.*" What exactly does "south" mean? Wing-Commander contemplated sending cryptic signal to Air Ministry :—"*Ref. your Movement Order of 12-10-41.*

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See Psalm 146, verse 3." The verse in question is the celebrated " Put not thy trust in Princes."

Heavy mist to-day, the first of the season. Mists apparently occur here with endless frequency in winter —causes : the comparatively warm currents of the Gulf Stream (that keep Murmansk an ice-free port) meeting and washing the shores of an utterly frozen continent. Further signals sent out by the C.O. requesting more details of our proposed " southern route." Russian authorities consulted on the spot seem to think that if we are really to travel to the Middle East via Central and Southern Russia, it will take us a minimum of two months—with four months a more likely probability. (Hasty calculations of the Wing-Staff :—That means that the barest minimum of 40 tons of rations will have to be lugged along with us.) It is, of course, almost impossible for the authorities in England to visualize what conditions of railway-transport over long distances here are like. The standing miracle is that military supplies are still continuing efficiently to be got up to the 2,000-mile front from all over the vast country. How a stray English Wing is to cut across this over-strained network of communications. . . ?

No doubt all such problems will settle themselves.

October 15th

News received from Air Ministry that " *Embassy and whole of Military and Air Mission leaving Moscow tonight for Kuibishev. Please inform Archangel.*" So that's that !— or at least, a bit of it. The " degree of priority " marked on the message is that of " EMERGENCY "—that is to say, it takes precedence over all other signals whatever, save only those sent out, similarly marked, by Commanders-in-Chief and Ambassadors. The Russian news about the position of the general line of the Front has been fairly vague of late. There has never been for one second the slightest diminution of Russian confidence.

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Work has gone forward, with detached unconcern. So much for the exact spirit of confidence that prevails among the Russians.

But all the same, "Kuibishev," a new name in the communiques, turns out to be the ancient town of Samara re-named. It is on the easternmost bend of the Volga, 500 miles east of Moscow. And if the Embassies are evacuating thither in a hurry, it means at least that there is a sober calculation of the chances of Moscow falling.

October 16th

A minor Hun raid on the Camp. Seven bombs dropped on aerodrome, nil damage, nil casualties. Twenty Russian pilots are now operational on Hurricanes. Training of ground-personnel continued.

October 17th

Three patrols. Nil combats, nil casualties.

October 20th

The ink froze in some of the office and bedroom ink-wells today. Thank God for warm and appropriate clothing. We are allowed to wear battle-dress, and anything else that we can collect or buy off the Russians.

October 30th

Nothing doing for the pilots, except those engaged on teaching. Technical staff, wireless and engineering sections, still as hard at work as ever. The Russian technicians are insatiable. They have a trick of turning up late in the mornings, which causes grief and pain to our Meester Feesher and our Meester Gittins—but they never stop once they get started, and are ready to go on until all hours of the night—which worries our Meester Feesher and our Meester Gittins still worse.

November 5th

General arrives at afternoon Conference with baby reindeer. I have to put notice in D.R.O.'s* tonight:

* Daily Routine Orders.

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"A reindeer has been taken on Wing-strength as from today's date. Volunteer (preferably with experience) to report to Orderly Room for duties of grooming, feeding and exercising same."

November 14th

S/Ldr. Miller gets a wire from England today to say that he is the father of a daughter. Put notice in D.R.O.'s: "The Wing-Commander has authorized the issue to the Wing of an extra tot of rum tonight to drink the health of S/Ldr. Miller's newly-born daughter."

The life of the Camp continues to be, as ever, excessively various. . . .

CHAPTER X

RUSSIAN METHODS

November-December

THE question of Russian methods now comes more prominently into the foreground, though it had of course been importantly in the picture of Wing history since the moment that the Wing first landed. We had been alternately, or even simultaneously, guests and hosts, teachers and learners—and in the closest sense of all, collaborators.

A very generalized sketch will have to suffice, and it does not pretend to be all-embracing. It consists of what a certain small group of British R.A.F. thought of a small group of their Russian opposite-numbers. If any hint of "patronage" comes into it, it is unintentional. We were out in Russia, in this particular instance, in the capacity of teachers—demonstrators of a particular type of British machine, the Hurricane, that, in an earlier

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version of the same aircraft, had shown its efficiency in the Battle of Britain. No. 151 Wing were not out there to learn—and were probably not even shown—the latest type of Soviet fighter-aircraft.

One predominant impression remains—of the eagerness of the Russian personnel, of their almost ultra-enthusiasm. An instance :—One of them, forsaken by all his guardian angels, had somehow or other acquainted himself with the fact that the Hurricane could remain in the air for "X" hours. Perfectly true—so it can, under ideal conditions, and *only* if it is flown for every second of that time at its "most economical cruising-speed." (Immediately, of course, the Hurricane gets into fighting it increases speed and also its petrol-consumption for exactly as long as it remains at that speed). The "*operational*" endurance of the Hurricane is therefore much less. However, the word had gone round the Russians that the Hurricane was, in action, an "X-hour" aircraft—and it took more than the Wing experts could say, and more than one write-off by Russian pilots, to convince them to the contrary.

Similarly with the particular wireless-equipment fitted to the machine. They would take the set away, after having been instructed in it by our admirable wireless-officer, F/Lt. Fisher, and their experts would then proceed to add certain features to it, to take certain features of it away, and in general to try to make it do something that it was never intended or designed to do. Hence the invariable plea a couple of days later, "Meester Feesher, why won't this wireless-set give results? What is the matter with it?" In the end, sheer practical experience—plus a very definite word or two on the subject from the General—put both these matters in order. It came to be recognized that what the English instructors laid down for their own aircraft and its gear was the result of years of operational experience, and was made the definite Table of the Law. Initial misunderstandings

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had been, of course, the fruits of keenness, general enthusiasm, and intrepidity in a high form—and were quite comprehensible. After all, if English pilots and technicians were presented with a new aircraft of high performance, it is unlikely that they would not try, at least for a first start-off, to operate it "just one degree better than the other fellow. . . ."

The following are some notes on the training part of the expedition, made by Squadron-Leader Miller,* commanding No. 134 Squadron :—

"No. 134 did nearly all the training of the Russian pilots, this coming about to some extent by chance—as did much else that happened. . . . One day, in the early days, I was in the '*Kommandnii Punkt*' (the 'operations-room' overlooking the aerodrome), when a Russian officer walked in and was introduced—Kapitan Raputsokov. He was a thick-set, solid and stolid sort of fellow with a quiet sense of humour. He was an instructor, and had a job as a sort of C.F.S. (Central Flying School) Inspector, flying round to various units and flying all types of aircraft. He mentioned that he had flown Hurricanes, and by the universally-understood gesture of 'thumbs-up' indicated that he thought them '*horosho*'—'the goods.'

"That evening the British pilots were entertained to dinner by the Russians, the first of the convivial parties staged between us—and believe me, it was very convivial. Next to me at table sat Raputsokov, cheerful and still solid, a rock upon whom waves of alcohol were breaking without shaking his calm. Later in the evening he—perfect instructor that he was—guided my wavering footsteps through concert-halls and dining-rooms, quietly looking after me with genial politeness.

"There seemed only one thing to do ; I made him an honorary member of the Squadron. I hoped that he would fly with us, and I felt sure he would be a good pilot.

* Now W/Cdr. Miller, D.F.C., Order of Lenin.

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I asked the General if he could be semi-officially attached to us, and the General agreed right away, adding that Raputsokov was to be the first instructor on Hurricanes anyway.

"Unfortunately, Raputsokov never flew with us in action. He was killed only a few days later, trying to bring back a Russian bomber which had been hit by ack-ack on a raid over the enemy lines. The bomber crashed near Vianga, he and all the crew being killed.

"In Raputsokov's place another Russian officer was detailed to us—Kapitan Safonov,* the ace fighter-pilot of the 72nd Regiment of the Red Naval Air Fleet, the "Group" to which we happened to be attached. Safonov was credited with something between twelve and twenty confirmed victories; he had been awarded the Soviet Order of the 'Red Banner' the night of the party, and received the highest decoration of all, 'Hero of the Soviet Union,' later on. He was obviously a more than capable pilot, a brilliant shot—as we learnt later to our own cost in impromptu revolver competitions, and was given command of the Wing of three squadrons which the Russians ultimately formed from our Hurricanes when we had handed them over.

"He was accompanied in his work by Kapitan Kuharienko, a short, lively, wiry little man with a permanent grin, who afterwards commanded one of the squadrons of the wing. The two men were as different as chalk and cheese; Safonov was the traditional Russian, large, solid, serious, methodical and slow to learn, while Kuharienko was small, lively, always amused, and delightfully slap-dash. When Safonov took-off a Hurricane for the first time, he got everything carefully 'set', made a good straight take-off and climbed to 1,500 feet before he turned; his landings were the same, and he did two or three careful circuits-and-landings with his undercarriage down before he tried anything else.

* Now Lt.-Col. Safonov.

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Kuharienko, on the other hand, jumped in, took-off (with the rudder-bias in the wrong position) in a series of sickening swerves, and then proceeded to beat up his own aerodrome and demonstrate what a Hurricane was like doing flick-rolls. . . . He landed, laughing like anything, and pointing first to the rudder-bias, then tapping his forehead, shouted '*Plocha—plocha*' ('Bad—bad!') evidently thinking the whole thing a tremendous joke. . . .

"Another of the Russian instructors was Yacobenko, who afterwards commanded another of the Hurricane squadrons. He was an ex-cavalry officer, who remarked that he had got bored with riding one 'horse' when he found that he could drive so many hundred of them all at once when in the cockpit of a fighter-aircraft. . . . I remember one morning when the weather was dud, two or three of us went down to visit his squadron which had taken over our old dispersal-huts. He told us all about himself and gave us a most amusing commentary on sport in Russia—all with about fifty words of Russian and English between us, but many expressive gestures and grimaces, and pictures drawn in the snow. . . .

"His favourite gesture, after muttering 'Fascist crafts!' (Fascist aircraft) with extraordinary venom, was to metaphorically spit on the ground, grind in the supposed expectoration with his heel, draw his finger across his throat in ferocious pantomime, and then dance and stamp on whatever floor was available until the rafters rang and the whole building shook. . . . The pantomime was adopted by 134 Squadron as a squadron war-dance. We felt that it would go with a swing in an English pub or an English mess, as long as the carpet would stand up to it. . . . Unfortunately, Yakobenko disappeared before we left. Soon after the Russians had begun night-flying the Hurricanes, he and Kuharienko went off one night to beat up Petsamo, but only Kuharienko returned, reporting that his companion

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had probably been hit by ack-ack. We heard many rumours that he had got down on our side of the line, but he did not materialize, and eventually had to be given up as lost.

"The General' — Major-General Kuznetsov — was Russian Air-Officer-Commanding, was actually the first Russian to fly one of our Hurricanes. He was given an aircraft to himself, with his own number and the Red Star painted on it. He was an ex-instructor, a most experienced pilot, with some thousands of hours flying. The next to take off was Safonov. After his first trip he had the misfortune to run through a puddle on the aerodrome when landing. This was bad luck rather than bad management, the aerodrome being waterlogged after heavy rain, but he damaged his flaps, and the General was not too pleased. It was on the whole not a bad thing really, because it made Safonov more inclined to listen to our advice on the matter of landing Hurricanes, having been a little inclined, previously, to know better himself. . . . We found, at first, that the Russian pilots in general were a little inclined to consider our advice unnecessary—after all, most of them were experienced professionals, had far more aggregate flying hours than us, and were in general considerably older. . . .

"However, one other rather amusing incident helped to put this right. One day we were proudly shown over Safonov's own Russian aircraft by Safonov himself and a group of other Russian pilots. It was one of the standard types of Soviet fighters called the 'I.16'—very strong, particularly as to its undercarriage and flaps, in order to stand up to the rough Soviet aerodromes. In many ways it made the Hurricane, which we consider a pretty tough and hefty aeroplane, look quite a dainty and delicate creature. Its stubby fuselage and short wings, however, made us feel that, though very manœuverable, it might also have some vicious tricks. The pilots who were

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showing us over the aircraft were, moreover, keen to impress on us that this was a difficult aircraft to fly, and that ' only the very best pilots could fly the I.16.'

" We retorted that the Hurricanes on the other hand were practically viceless and that any fool could fly them. Later on, when the Russian pupils occasionally and inevitably made heavy landings in Hurricanes, damaging wing-tips and undercarriages, we would chant in chorus, ' Only the best pilots can fly the I.16. . . .' It may have been rather adding insult to injury—but it was taken and given on both sides in the friendliest spirit, and it put them in the right frame of mind to listen to our advice.

" Most of the instructing was done by Flight-Lieutenant Ross, D.F.C., and he and Kuharienko formed a great friendship. ' They are great friends,' Safonov declared, ' because they are both practically dwarfs, and have the same problems in being able to see out of a cockpit.' " (Our own ' Kapitan ' Ross, of the mantel-piece incident at Peake Moor, and one of the gayest and most unfailingly amusing of all our pilots who ever trod Soviet soil, was killed on active service shortly after his return to the United Kingdom.)

" All Soviet pilots had the Hurricane explained to them both by Ross and by Safonov or Kuharienco, and, as and when they seemed fit, they were sent off solo. A certain difficulty was experienced in getting them to put their undercarriages up for the routine of circuits-and-landings, and also in persuading them to close their hoods, as they were used to open cockpits. However, this was mentioned to the General one night quite casually, and he forthwith issued an order that pilots who did not retract their undercarriages and close their hood would be grounded indefinitely ! Thereafter the Russians used to take off, taxi, land and fly, with their hoods firmly closed, and were so keen to get their under-carriages up the instant they left the ground that we

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sometimes feared that there would be a premature flop. . . .

" They were very keen to learn to fly the Hurricanes, and would turn up and demand training in the most appalling weather. I remember one pilot doing his first solo in a snowstorm that would have shaken any of us. It took him three shots to get down, and each time he went round again and disappeared clean out of sight. I never expected to see him again; however he 'made it.' . . .

" When they first started to turn up for training they were inclined to be a little distrustful of us, our aeroplanes and our efforts, but they gradually and rapidly thawed out. . . . They took keenly to darts, there being boards in each of our dispersal-huts; and one man, Lieutenant Roden, became quite a good performer, quickly getting the idea of starting on a double and finishing on a double. He used to put tremendous energy into his darts, using them more like harpoons, so that they were practically buried in the darts-board. . . .

" On the whole, as pilots, we found the Russians good, experienced, and not needing much instruction to get the Hurricanes weighed up. As they got to know our pilots, they showed more and more interest in our formation and tactics, and asked innumerable questions. They were particularly interested in our close formations and our 'weavers'" (individual aircraft who give top-protection and low-protection to the main body of the Flight). " They had apparently not thought of weavers, and when they got going we used to see them weaving away themselves. . . .

" Their method of doing 'dailies' (daily inspections) on their guns caused us some apprehension. This was simply to get into the cockpit and press the button while the aircraft was standing in its dispersal-bay, thus putting a short burst (of several hundred rounds) over the local hillside. We persuaded them this was a bad thing,

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as it both blew off the gun-patches and necessitated constant cleaning of the gun-barrels. They ceased the practice; and as a result one Russian pilot got into a fight and found to his horror that his guns would not work—his aircraft had been used for training, and he had taken off with his guns unloaded. After that, in the name of safety, he went back to his method of firing short bursts into the hillside. . . .

"All in all, the Russians had one great asset, they had guts. They thought nothing of the Hun, and were quite prepared to take on the Me. 109's in their 220-m.p.h. biplanes. They would fly in the most awful weather; their bombers were doing three and four sorties a day from Vianga aerodrome; and eventually they were doing bombing raids with old flying boats fitted with skis. We used to call them the 'Russki Walrus,' and they had about the same performance and armament. . . .

"I once asked a Russian officer, at a time when the Hun was getting very near Moscow, what would happen if the Huns captured Moscow. He shrugged his shoulders and said, 'What would it matter? There is a lot more of Russia behind Moscow! . . .'

"No mention of our expedition would be complete without a word about our Russian A.O.C., the Major-General Kuznetsov aforementioned. He was undoubtedly one of the most charming personalities I have ever met—very quiet and reserved, but with an ever present sense of humour, and a way of saying little but to the point. He always did everything that he could for us, and if he wanted us to do anything he put it to us in such a way that we felt we had suggested it. No unit could have served under a more charming and tactful military commander, and it would be a real pleasure to have the opportunity of welcoming him and entertaining him in England."

* * * * *

The above are the notes of an experienced British

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Squadron-Leader who had played his part in the Battle of Britain, and who commanded one of the squadrons of the wing throughout its time on Soviet soil. His opinion of the Russian General is echoed both by Squadron-Leader Rook,* and by the Wing-Commander. A few further opinions by miscellaneous persons are now appended.

Russian Anti-aircraft fire.—Within a very few days of the Wing arriving, it saw Russian anti-aircraft fire in action, the occasion being the first of the many German raids on the aerodrome. The Russians put up an instantaneous barrage that was admitted by all English beholders to be astonishing for its speed, accuracy, and intensity. Incidentally there was never an anti-aircraft gun visibly to be discerned about the camp. The defences, except when in action, seemed to be quietly non-existent.

Russian Camouflage.—Arising out of the last paragraph it may be said that the Russians had nothing more to learn—though possibly something to teach—in the matter of aerodrome camouflage. The " Kommandnii Punkt " (the Operations-Room at the aerodrome where the Wing-Commander spends his days) is dug out of a hillside facing a corner of the aerodrome. It is electrically lighted, and contains charts and maps and a telephone-exchange, and is in communication with all parts of the aerodrome—but is invisible both from the air and from the earth ; one can walk straight up to within a few yards of it—and then have to be guided inside it by the sentry on duty. The Wing-Commander was taken to see certain repair-workshops of the Russians the other day. He says that he was taken to a hillside overlooking a valley, and thence looked down on certain kitchen-gardens and birch-plantations. *Below* the said kitchen-gardens and birch-plantations had been excavated vast repair-shops, totally invisible from anywhere. It is obvious that the Russians have singularly little to learn as regards camouflage.

* Now W/Cdr. Rook, D.F.C., Order of Lenin.

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Technicians' Examination.—There was recently held an examination for the Russian technicians who had been studying under our own Engineer-Officer. Our Engineer-Officer, with all his qualities, is one of the most bigoted Britons that I have ever met. He set the examination himself, and took care that there should be no easy marking on it. The Russian technicians put up a show that shook him. On the subject of the Hurricane, that they had only known a few weeks, and that through the medium of an interpreter, one of the candidates got 98 per cent., and the average of those who passed was about 80 per cent. Our Engineer-Officer* stated that similar results in England would be hard to come by.

Discipline and Cleanliness (Naval).—A British Naval Commander, operating in close touch with Russian submarines :—"The thing that struck me most was their discipline and cleanliness. Discipline is rigid, and they're especially hot on saluting. As for cleanliness—if I could get my own submarine up to that pitch of cleanliness for her annual inspection, I'd be very pleased with myself."

Observer-Corps Work.—Has been very favourably commented on for its accuracy and rapidity. We have been given running commentaries on actions happening miles out of our sight, which reports have been later confirmed in detail by our pilots.

Aerodrome Construction.—British Air-Mission officers from Moscow gave some very surprising details of Russian aerodrome-construction—marshes having been drained, surfaces prepared, and roads and runways built, in a time that would be inconceivable by its shortness in England.

Comment from our C.O., when discussing the Russians generally.—"They learn as fast as hell—and they're flat out to do anything they can for us."

* * * * *

*S/Ldr. Gittins, M.B.E.

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This dictum, coming from the one officer who by his position of Command has had entire responsibility, not only for the safety of every man in his Wing, but for the carrying out on our side of the entire process of collaboration, must be accepted as the last word on the subject.

CHAPTER XI

FINALE

November-December

IT would be pleasant to end these notes on the North Russian Expedition with a record of some spectacular triumph—some *sortie* of the Wing at full operational strength with countless enemy destroyed—with something just one degree more spectacular than anything it had yet achieved in spite of a consistent record of successful fighting, successful teaching, and warm and friendly relationship with Allies. But unfortunately neither history, nor indeed the very conditions of the Wing's being in Russia, allow it. The Expedition was governed throughout by what must be called the "law of diminishing returns"—the longer the Wing stayed in Russia the more and more of its aircraft were handed over, by contract, to Soviet pilots. There was no question of any such thing as a last sortie "at full strength," for, several weeks before the Wing took its final departure, all Wing aircraft and equipment, even down to pilots' personal flying-helmets, Mae-Wests and dinghies, had been handed over by long pre-arranged agreement—and the Wing, as regards "aircraft strength" had simply ceased to exist.

A certain number of our pilots still went down to the aerodrome from day to day to help where they could in

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matters of instruction; our engineering and wireless personnel found that it had plenty to do right up to the last days before sailing (and the Wing even left behind wireless and equipment detachments, a cypher-staff, and individual M.T.-drivers behind it when it departed.) But combative flying ceased for the Wing on the day that the signal went out, in response to urgent Air Ministry enquiries—the date was October 20th :—" All aircraft handed over to Soviet pilots." Thereafter, whenever German aircraft came over on stray daylight tip-and-run raids, it was no longer the Wing's duty or responsibility to go up and fight them. It could merely watch Soviet pilots getting increasingly expert in the technique of a " scramble " take-off—in the Wing's own former machines.

It may be asked, " Why did not the Wing stay out in Russia in view of its admirable record in fighting and flying, and the complete and warm friendship that it had now settled down to with its hosts ? " The answer was given by the Russians themselves. To keep a detached British Wing out in Russia, fifteen hundred or so sea-miles from its English base, would have needed a considerable amount of shipping-space once the original stores that we had brought with us had run out. (It is true that we had drawn mainly on the local sources for rations, but after the first weeks we had fed 200 airmen daily in our own " English " dining-hall off the English stores, and if the Wing had stayed longer than its budgeted three months, vast further supplies of food, equipment and clothing would have had to be sent out.) If this shipping-space were available, over and above what was basically essential for tanks, guns, munitions, etc., that the Allies were already sending—then the Soviet authorities roundly said that they would prefer it to be used for more Hurricanes. Three squadrons of Soviet pilots could now fly them—and fly them expertly enough to teach others, and the ground-staffs were competent at servicing and

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maintaining them. Personally, they liked us—there was never the slightest suspicion of ill-feeling, as a series of coruscating "farewell parties" most definitely showed—but the cry of the Soviet higher authorities was, equally definitely, "Give us more Hurricanes."

The Wing, in a word, carried out the function for which it was originally created from the beginning—to arrive, to get cracking, to assist others to get cracking on its own type of aircraft, and then to depart.

But there remained certain weeks of waiting, for the evacuation of an entire Wing is not worked out in a day—and the bright thought of sending us two thousand miles through Southern Russia to the Middle East was only abandoned after a long interchange of cables—and transport, either by sea or rail, to Archangel proved to be impracticable—and the Admiralty could not be expected, in the matter of minutes, to produce warships from up its sleeve to take the Wing off from Murmansk Sound. Ultimately the Wing embarked, in parties, some in Destroyers, some in Cruisers, between November 20th and December 1st.

What were the outstanding events—or even occupations—of the intervening time?

In the first place, there was the ever-present problem of keeping a Wing of 550 airmen, and fifty or so pilots, amused and interested after their main occupation, that of keeping aircraft in the air, had gone. Route-marches and rifle-shooting, football games and physical-training were all tried in succession—but all were limited by the conditions of the weather. The weather had by now become extraordinarily cold; temperatures as low as 5 degrees Fahrenheit (i.e., 27 degrees of frost) being registered. Route-marching became an impossibility in a certain condition of the roads—a time when the hardest frost had given place to a slight thaw, and this in turn to a hard frost again. At these times the surfaces of roads became as slippery as polished glass. P.T.

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(physical training) was started for all young officers at 8.30 in the mornings, rather as a gesture of defiance to the elements. (After all, " P.T. before breakfast, within the Arctic Circle, in the month of November," would read very heroically in all squadron record-books in after years. It was not actually so bad in practice ; it was kept very short and very sharp ; and the scramble across the half-mile of gleaming snow to breakfast warmed up anyone whose hands were in danger of frost-bite. The decree held good as long as temperatures were only 10 degrees below freezing ; when the temperature fell below this and a wind sprang up, then the practice had to be abandoned.)

Incidentally, it is to be recorded that no section of the Wing-personnel felt the cold really seriously at any time. The Russian system of double-windows to barrack-blocks, and wood-stoves in all rooms, was effective. Fuel was unlimited, for the whole country-side was wooded, and logs were to be had simply for the sawing and chopping (several of our airmen came in the end to wield a very pretty axe. . . .) The health of the troops, in the dry, clear, bright atmosphere, remained unexceptionally good. The sergeant-pilots devised a song of their own with the refrain—

" Hardships, yer bastards ?
Yer don't know what hardships *are* ! "

And the song, if satirical in intention, remained basically true. The increasing discontent of the young pilot-officers was not so easily answered. It was the discontent of inactivity. They grumbled, quite seriously, as though they were enduring all the tortures of the damned ; and it had equally seriously to be explained to them that campaigns and even wars themselves are not run exclusively with regard to the flying-time of young pilot-officers. (But at its worst the grumbling was no more than the result of idleness and frustration—

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the reverse side of the medal of which the face was the burning desire to be again shooting down Huns.)

On the whole, one retains an impression of marvellously high, good-tempered gaiety—interrupted by interludes of shouting and singing, scuffling and throwing cushions about when superfluous energy rose to boiling-point. Meals were always an "occasion." One used often to wonder what an outsider, a stranger new-out from England, would have thought if suddenly set down in that crowded electric-lighted supper-room. The boys would have walked their half-mile of snowy, slippery (and often icy) broken ground, across to the small, brightly-lighted and heated mess. The small hall outside would be piled high with shed flying-coats, flying-boots, fur hats and revolvers. Inside, the Russian waitresses—one of them a girl of great beauty—would be serving the boys with their meals. The babble of conversation would be incessant, and the jokes—silly enough in themselves—would be treated as uproariously comic. (There is no doubt but that ninety per cent. of the mess felt itself, in the dry, bright atmosphere of those parts, more physically healthy and "alive" than in the soddenness of an English winter.) The waitresses would have to have the jokes explained to them, where possible, by an interpreter. There would usually be a Russian officer or two dining with us, possibly having their legs pulled, and quite agreeable to having their legs pulled. Some of them frankly thought the English pilots quite mad in the things that they found funny, and some of them understood everything instinctively. It is possible that craziness among pilots is a universal passport to understanding.

It may be mentioned in passing that all these meals were now taken quite "dry." The so-called "vino," in early days served at the evening meal, had long since run out. All the gaiety that there was, was entirely the result of natural high spirits, and was not the fruit of the

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vine. If " parties " have figured in the narrative heretofore, it must be understood in fairness that they were special set-pieces, occurring only at the rate of about one a month, on a definite and given occasion. For the rest, the rule of the camp on working days, laid down by the C.O., had been " no alcohol of any sort, either at lunch or before evening dinner." The evening drink, usually the rum-ration served with hot water and sugar, was taken before going to bed.

There came the " November Celebrations "—the three-day festivities round November 7th, when the Russians celebrated the anniversary of the 1917 Revolution, that gave them their present Government and Constitution. Outwardly the show was normal enough, to those who were familiar with peace-time Soviet Russia. The General gave a formal dinner-party—that is to say, an invitation dinner to certain officers of the Wing, Safonov and other recently-decorated Russian officers present, with a scattering of interpretresses, in what would be called in England " afternoon-frocks," making up the female element. Afterwards, a move was made to the local village-hall—always, even in the smallest village, the " hall " took the form of a quite large theatre, where an entertainment, crowded to the doors, was in progress—speeches and a theatrical performance.

Nothing was abnormal about these things, the speeches and the performance—save only the time and place of their happening. The speeches were extraordinarily realistic and balanced ; figures of Russian casualties were given, amounting to nearly two-million,* the prospects of the campaign were discussed ; the position of the battle-line was indicated accurately ; the fact was not minimized that Russia had an extraordinarily hard task ahead of her. And then the dancing began—the dancing, the singing, the theatrical sketches, the juggling-turns

* November, 1941.

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. . . all frankly and heartily enjoyed by crowded audiences of the local soldiers and the local village populace.

It was a lesson in " morale " that would be hard to improve upon. In that bitter Arctic peninsula, hundreds of miles from what is accepted as " civilization," and only twenty miles or so from its own part of the actual battle-front—a realistic statement could be given out to the assembled populace, mostly army-troops, which amounted in effect to a declaration that much of the industrial area of the country was in the hands of the enemy—the equivalent in England would be that an area including many of our greatest industrial towns and most fertile counties had been captured and over-run. The general position, and the tasks awaiting each one of them, was then explained to them. Then the dancing and the gaiety. . . . This was at a time, remember, when the Russian " advance " had not yet begun, and was, in effect, the most critical times of the retreat. And yet, one had the impression, at that time and at that time exactly, that if any member of the Russian audience had got up and *suggested* the possibility of ultimate Russian defeat, he would not have been put up against a wall and shot as a traitor—but would merely have been laughed at as a polite lunatic. . . .

The self-confidence of the Russians—in themselves, their resources and in their country—was nothing less than supreme.

Two last instances may give a further idea of it. Late one night the author of this book was walking back along the mile-and-a-half of snow that separated the village from the Camp. There had been a cinema-show in the village—an English technicolour film, that he personally had found insupportable (though the English and Russians both enjoyed it). Along the snow-covered road—there under the stars and the moonlight—he was passed by a train of lorries carrying Russian soldiers, singing loudly

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and exultantly. . . . It cannot have been done "to impress the English visitors," as we have been told in former times that so much is done in Soviet Russia. The writer happened to be the only Englishman within miles, and he was walking along in the shadow of a hillside, and the lorries were passing him at twenty miles an hour, oblivious of his presence. It was a lonely bit of the country—like an empty and frozen and deserted Sahara. And the singing, performed without an audience as the lorries careered along, seemed an extraordinarily convincing proof—in view of the place and the time—that the Russians were genuinely pleased with themselves and one another.

The last instance, known to members of the Wing personally. One day a Russian pilot—a man whom we had entertained in our own mess, and known to us as a friend—had a single-handed fight over the lines with two German aircraft. He shot down the first, and then rammed the second. (This is an authentic technique exploited by the Russians, and they have learned also the technique of frequently getting away with it.) He baled out himself, and then, landing by chance close to his opponents, faced the two occupants of the rammed aircraft. (It is necessary to mention again that the countryside up there is almost completely deserted apart from a few military posts. The crew of a German bomber that had crashed, walked for ten days in the snow without meeting a single soul.) The Russian pilot fought the two Germans on foot. He shot one with his revolver, and then shot the Boxer dog that the German pilot had brought with him. He then had a hand-to-hand grapple with the second German, had a few teeth knocked out and his face slashed open from the forehead to the chin —and then killed the German by firing his Verey cartridge-pistol into him at close range. He then walked back for four days through the snow, with his feet frost-bitten, and retired to sick-quarters. (Many of the medical

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details of this extraordinary achievement were substantiated by our own M.O., who visited the pilot in hospital. . . .) It was an achievement that was in its way heroic. It was the quintessence—the last or highest essence—of the spirit in which the Russians are fighting the war. They are there to exterminate all enemies, as long as those enemies remain on Soviet soil. . . .

* * * * *

These were the people, then, that we had impressed, and who in turn had impressed us ; and this mutual and growing trust, this acceptance and respect of one another's conventions, is probably as near as one can get to a definition of what is meant by the word " liaison." (In using the word " we " I stand detached from it personally. I am referring to the flying boys of the Wing and to our Commanding-Officer—whose easy and instinctive co-operation with the Russian General had been one of the chief successes of the expedition ; and to our technical personnel and their dealings with their opposite numbers. I had only a minor and administrative job with the Wing, and therefore had all the more leisure to observe it.)

Four members of the Wing were decorated by the Soviet Government with one of the two highest Soviet awards, the " Order of Lenin "—an order never before given to any foreigner :—Wing-Commander Isherwood, A.F.C., Squadron-Leaders Rook and Miller, both for their own brilliant services and as a collective recognition of the work of their whole squadrons ; and a non-commissioned pilot, Flight Sergeant Haw,* who had himself shot down three Germans " confirmed," the highest score made by any individual pilot in the limited time available.

If one mentions that the upshot of this was a party, given by us this time, one is only speaking the truth.

* Now Flying-Officer Haw.

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The long, echoing, first-floor corridor of our Kremlin—the only space in it large enough to accommodate the half-a-hundred Russians to whom we had sent written invitations, was laid out to "look like" a party—with tables stretching down it covered with white table-cloths, extra electric-lights installed for the occasion, some green-stuff plucked from neighbouring birch-forests draped round the lamps, and the tables groaning under bottles of English spirits and Russian edibles—an amateurish affair when compared with the hospitality of the Berkeley in London or the Metropole in Moscow—but serving its turn within the frozen rim of the Arctic Circle, and enjoyed by all.

As a party—like the small expedition as a whole—it was a classic.

* * * * *

Not so long afterwards, the Naval transports appeared in the bay to take us home. The Wing disappeared, as it had at first appeared, by various parties, escorts, and convoys. As the last and largest party embarked on a British cruiser, the air was still alive with the sound of Hurricanes, flown by Russian pilots by now. The General and Kapitan Safonov had, as has been remarked before, thought that it would be a nice idea for them to fly the farewell patrol themselves.

The Wing may be said, by the same token, to have achieved its immediate and limited objectives. It had got its pupils-for-the-minute interested in, and enthusiastic about, Hurricanes. It had shown them some flying of Hurricanes—and its record of victories had not been quite as easily achieved as may appear on paper. There had been long hours and days and weeks of waiting, in the freezing cold, "at immediate readiness"—i.e., the pilots strapped into their cockpits out on the open aerodrome—before contact had been established in that strange northern climate. And best of all, it had made friends.

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A small group of pilots of one nationality had come on terms of mutual regard with the pilots of another nationality—the pilots of our new Ally, a moment perhaps of greater significance than anything else in the Wing's records, when related to later events in the world.

The Wing embarked, having, even if in an infinitely small way, contributed to universal history.

March, 1942.

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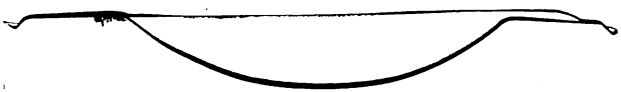

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